Art of the Wild: Gertrude Hermes and the Natural World

7th February – 4th May

Information Pack for Teachers

About the exhibition:

Drawing on the rich collections of the Ashmolean Museum, this exhibition features innovative prints influenced by Gertrude Hermes’ enduring fascination with the natural world. Exploring the work of one of the most important, but little-known, British female artists of the 20th century, the exhibition showcases Hermes’ process from preliminary sketches and carved woodblocks through to the final prints.

The accompanying interactives explore the artwork and objects on display through sound, textures, books, poetry, drawing and labels for younger visitors. Activity bags suited for under 5s are also available.
About Gertrude Hermes:

‘We all sensed there was something special about Gertie and her relations with animals, trees, plants, insects. She watched them so intently – seemed more finely tuned to all living things than most of us. ... Hers was a gentle wildness.’

Gertrude Hermes’ sister May

One of the most imaginative and talented wood engravers of her generation, Gertrude Hermes OBE RA (1901–1983) drew much of her inspiration from nature, revealing a restless curiosity about the world around her, including the River Thames. Her prints echo both the pleasures and strangeness of water, plants and animals.

An innovative sculptor, printmaker and teacher, Hermes was trained by the unconventional British modernist artist Leon Underwood (1890–1975), who encouraged her to capture forms in the natural world with a rapidly flowing line. She developed a highly distinctive style that combined great technical skill with a bold sense of design, transforming direct observations of her surroundings into large-scale wood engravings, linocuts and sculptures.

1901 Gertrude Anna Bertha Hermes is born near Bromley in Kent, the second of five children of a German silk wear designer, Louis Hermes, and his wife Helene. Their house in Bickley from 1905 has a large garden with a pond, vegetable plots and fruit trees. There are chickens, goats and a donkey, as well as other pets.

1912–18 Gertrude attends Belmont School in Bickley, where she wins prizes for diving and swimming, and excels at art, producing detailed botanical studies.

1919–20 Gertrude attends Beckenham School of Art (now Ravensbourne College), and stays in Munich with her aunt Mary Rossler, an artist.

1921–22 Begins her studies at Leon Underwood’s Brook Green School in Hammersmith, where she studies alongside Henry Moore and Blair Hughes-Stanton, Eileen Agar and Raymond Coxon. Marion Mitchell introduces her fellow students to wood engraving techniques following a visit to Paris, inspiring Gertrude to work on prints of cows, calves and dogs.
1925–26 Hermes becomes a founding member of the English Wood Engraving Society. She marries Blair Hughes-Stanton (1902–81).

1927–29 Whilst living by the Thames at Hammersmith Terrace in Chiswick, Gertrude experiences a flood and moves to Hatcheston in Suffolk. The newly-married Irina and Henry Moore camp in her garden on honeymoon. The family often swim in the river there.

1930 Gertrude completes work on her illustrations for A Florilege, by Irene Gosse. She and Blair move to Tregynon in Wales to work for the Gregynog Press, but a year later Gertrude and the children return to London.

1931–32 Gertrude designs a fountain and mosaic pool for the new Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

1933–35 Gertrude is invited to join the Society of Wood Engravers and exhibits for the first time at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. She becomes a member of the London Group.

1938 Designs illustrations for Isaak Walton's The Compleat Angler. Member of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society.

1939 Represents Britain at the Venice International Exhibition. Visits the Mitchisons at Carradale House, on Kintyre, learning to fish and hunt. She passes her ambulance driving test.

1945–47 Teaches at Camberwell and St Martin’s School of Art. She holds classes in wood engraving and lino cutting for the Central School, as well as a weekly drawing class at London Zoo. Her garden studio in Danvers St, Chelsea, is surrounded by plants and decorated with natural found objects, such as animal skulls and horns.

1950–51 Her first solo exhibition in England goes on tour. Rooks and Rain is commissioned by the V&A, and she is elected fellow of the RE, for which The Prawn is her Diploma print.

1963–66 First woman engraver to be elected an Associate of the Royal Academy. From 1965 she also teaches at the RA Schools, though in 1966 she objects strongly to women’s exclusion from the RA dinners.
1967 Major retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery.

1971 Waterfall is her Diploma print when she is elected Royal Academician.

1981 Awarded OBE. A retrospective exhibition is held at the Royal Academy to celebrate her eightieth birthday.

1983 Dies aged 81 at her daughter’s house by the Avon Gorge in Bristol.

About wood engraving:

Once the artist has drawn the design, it is transferred to a block of fine-grained boxwood. The hard end-grain of the wood is used – cut horizontally across the tree trunk – giving a silky-smooth surface on which to work. Sometimes Hermes’ studies are more detailed, but she would often map out the design quite loosely, improvising details directly onto the block.

The block is then inked up with a roller, and a sheet of paper is laid over it. To transfer the ink to the paper, it can be hand-burnished (rubbed) with a spoon or put through a press. Areas where the wood has been cut away remain white, just as in a potato print.

Examples of wood engraving tools and footage of the process are available in the exhibition.
Themes in the work:

Animals

Gertrude Hermes had a lifelong sympathy for animals which she showed through her close observation of living creatures. At times animals represent narratives within her work, such as in *Serpent at the Nest*, *Jonah in the Whale* and *Undercurrents*, whereas in work such as *Birds* and *Owls* the movement and nature of the animals is the primary focus.

Water

Gertrude Hermes was a keen swimmer and diver and revelled in water’s physical sensations and abstract light effects. She explored the multiple facets of water from its movement and patterns to the joy of swimming in it and its dangers.

The prints on display that explore this theme are:

- *Swimmers*
- *One Person*
- *Fathomless Sounding*
- *The Warrior’s Tomb*
- *Undercurrents*

Plants

The abundance of nature never ceased to enchant Hermes who studied plants in school botany classes. Described as an artist-magician who could transform natural objects ‘into shapes that do something positive to the mind of the onlooker’, Hermes was able to render flowers that were never static but as lively as her animals.

The prints on display that explore this theme are:

- *Spanish Iris*
• Autumn Fruits
• Spring Bouquet
• Illustrations for ‘A Florilege, Chosen from the Old Herbals’, by Irene Gosse: Convolvulus, or Bindweed; Waterlilies, or Nunefar
• Illustrations for ‘A Florilege, Chosen from the Old Herbals’, by Irene Gosse: Thorn Apple; Mistletoe

Sculpture

Gertrude Hermes also created sculptures which she often made from wood found floating down the River Thames. She even asked passing tugboats to drag wood ashore for her to use. Gertrude said that being a sculptor helped her be more creative and imaginative.

On display in the exhibition is a photo of teak sculpture, Jonah in the Whale, 1934 which was destroyed by bombing in World War Two.

Poetry

Gertrude Hermes often took inspiration from poems. She copied them into the pages of her sketchbooks and counted many poets as her friends.

For copies of the poems that inspired prints on display in the exhibition, please see the Gertrude Hermes and Literature resource below.

Exhibition resources:

The following resources are available in the exhibition or can be printed in advance of your visit.

Drawing activities
Young Audience Labels
Gertrude Hermes and Literature
Websites:
https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/gertrude-hermes-ra
https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/gertrude-hermes-1277

For more information about the exhibition or to book a visit please contact the Learning Department at edbookings@rrm.co.uk or call 01491 415605

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