

ignorantly speculate and take the catalogue at its word. A more populist Science Museum exhibition is at times fighting to emerge from *Sculpture Victorious*, and its impact would probably be greater in the cultural context of the Victoria and Albert Museum rather than Tate Britain. That said, the exhibition will look more effective located anywhere other than in Louis Kahn's Yale Center for British Art. The sand-coloured linen wall coverings and carpeting of this shrine to architectural genius achieve the seemingly impossible: they kill the exuberant brilliance of exhibits, nowhere more obviously than Paul Colomera's *Peacock* for Minton & Co (1873; no.96). A further factor that compromises the exhibition, again beyond the curators' control, is the considerable number of exhibits included in the catalogue – often with excellent entries – which were originally proposed and presumably promised, but which appear in neither venue. Examples include John Gibson's *Tinted Venus*, Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *Phidias showing the frieze of the Parthenon to his friends*, two splendid pieces of early Australian silver and Alfred Gilbert's *Mors Janua Vitae*.

This last work leads on to concerns about the inadequate treatment accorded to the New Sculpture, which occupies just a tenth of the catalogue. It is not altogether convincingly rebranded as the 'Craft and Art' section. While George Frampton (and probably William Reynolds-Stephens) labelled themselves as 'art workers', how permanent was this self-image? Was this not a radical, relatively youthful phase in their development – which in Frampton's case proved to be a Churchillian trajectory to conservatism? Did any of them permanently repudiate the 'sculptor' label and secede from the Royal Academy, exhibiting in radical defiance of it? Other aspects of the New Sculpture, notably education, aestheticism, symbolism and historicism, whose centrality has been convincingly established by scholarship up to this point, are sold short. Edmund Gosse, one of the finest literary critics of the late nineteenth century, who was to the New Sculpture what John Ruskin was to Pre-Raphaelitism and Clement Greenberg to Abstract Expressionism, is inexcusably minimised. Yet paradoxically this reviewer partially forgives these shortcomings, such is the momentum generated up to this point and which continues to the very end. A nice leitmotif of the exhibition is the political parallels that were frequently made between the two monarchs, Elizabeth I and Victoria. They are first encountered in the little-known Edmond Johnson's charming conjoint portrait medal, commemorating the tercentenary of Trinity College, Dublin (1892; no.21); next, the Elkington, Mason & Co electrotype of Maximilian Colt's famous monument to Elizabeth I (1873; no.47); and then, in a rousing finale, Reynolds-Stephens's rarely seen tour de force of Arts and Crafts patriotism, *A royal game* (1906–11; no.150; Fig.93), where Elizabeth I and Philip II of Spain are

locked in a game of chess. We leave the exhibition with an important question in our minds: will *Sculpture Victorious* place a check on potential detractors?

¹ Catalogue: *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901*. Edited by Martina Droth, Jason Edwards and Michael Hatt, with contributions by Tim Barringer, Désirée de Chair, Edward S. Cooke, Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, A. Robin Hoffmann, Claire Jones, Tess Korobkin, Morna O'Neill, Lene Østermark-Johansen, Jennifer Powell, Catherine Roach, M. G. Sullivan, Marjorie Trusted, Sarah Victoria Turner and Caroline Vout. 448 pp. incl. 303 col. ills. (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014), \$80; £50. ISBN 978-0-300-20803-0. For Edwards's observations, see p.233.

² Royal Commission of Fine Arts, May 1852, quoted in *ibid.*, p.154.

³ *Ibid.*, p.247.

Clyfford Still

Denver

by EDWARD DIMENDBERG

STEPPING INTO THE business centre of Denver recently, it was difficult to miss the large billboard bearing a photograph of Clyfford Still (1904–80) accompanied by the following text: 'The canvas was his ally. The paint and trowel were his weapons. And the

art world was his enemy'. Even in the land that invented the brash advertising campaign, this promotional message from the **Clyfford Still Museum** was unusual. So bold a celebration of artistic individuality was likely to strike many as hyperbole.

Yet visiting *The War Begins: Clyfford Still's Paths to Abstraction* (closed 18th January), the tenth exhibition held in the Museum in the three years since it opened, was a bracing experience. One found oneself disarmed before an exhibition that avoided the cult of personality, presented a large body of unknown work (forty of the sixty-five paintings on display had never been exhibited) and posited an original and compelling argument for their importance.¹

The story of Still's stipulation in his will that his art be left to the American city that would build a museum to display it is already legendary. Almost everything about the artist and his work cast him in the role of outsider. Few of his contemporaries would have dared to refer to the Museum of Modern Art in New York as 'that gas chamber on 53rd Street'. Even fewer would have as assiduously spurned the art market. If ever there were an American painter whose career could be encapsulated by a quasi-military language of allies, weapons, and enemies, Still is it.

On display at the moment when museums around the world have mounted exhibitions on the occasion of the centenary of the First World War, *The War Begins: Clyfford Still's*



94. PH-618, by Clyfford Still. 1942. Canvas, 106.7 by 83.8 cm. (Clyfford Still Museum, Denver).



95. *PH-235*,
by Clyfford
Still. 1944.
Canvas, 266.7
by 235 cm.
(Clyfford Still
Museum,
Denver).

Paths to Abstraction provided a fascinating counterpoint in its exploration of Still's relation to the Second World War. It demonstrated how civilian mobilisation during military conflict shaped the development of the artist while convincingly proposing his own personal war against figuration and concessions to popular taste as the conditions of possibility for his art. Still required clearly defined cultural opponents as much as paint and canvas to produce his work which, as this exhibition suggested, unfolded according to an internal logic in continual interplay with external circumstances.

During the War years Still's life changed in myriad ways. He moved from Alberta and Washington State to the San Francisco Bay Area to work as a steel checker for the US Navy and then the Hammond Aircraft Company. His first daughter was born in 1939. Two years later a second arrived. In 1943 Still met Mark Rothko, most probably the person who introduced him to Peggy Guggenheim, sponsor of his first solo exhibition at her Art of this Century gallery in New York in 1946. The paintings of organic shapes from 1939 and 1940 and the portrait of his father from 1941 provided little hint of the next turn in his development.

Pulleys, cranes and tackle blocks, ubiquitous at the shipyard where he spent his workdays, figure prominently in the paintings of 1942. Life on a rural farm in Canada exposed Still at an early age to tractors and agricultural equipment, yet he never seems to have

of the machine. In this respect, he has fared rather better with the passage of time than many of his contemporaries, whose assessments of industrial civilisation today can appear irrationally optimistic or pessimistic. The significance of the machine in his art is formal, not social. Building ships and airplanes exposed him to an array of shapes and forms which he was quick to incorporate into his art.

They also facilitated the move away from agrarian scenes and the mythological symbolic language that permeated his art of the 1930s. *PH-618* of 1942 (Fig.94) depicts a ship against which float a pulley and pieces of a hull. The background is deep blue, the components are red, yellow and brown. As a prefiguration of the chromatic oppositions that Still was later to deploy to virtuoso effect in his best-known works of the 1950s, the painting is of considerable interest. Yet it is even more fascinating for its depiction of a prow of a ship in section alongside other parts shown in elevation. Still's mastery of drafting techniques was demonstrated in the show's first room by the inclusion of a large number of works on paper. These ranged from delicate watercolours and graphite drawings, to studies for paintings, to renderings that would not be out of place on the desk of a naval engineer. A signal contribution of the exhibition, curated by David Anfam, was to posit the significance of these works on paper to Still's evolution as a painter and to confirm the ease with which he was able to learn and grow while practising a trade that might seem wholly unrelated to the fine arts. The facility at working on various scales, drafting and managing relations between parts and wholes that Still

believed that technology alone held out the prospect of a better world. He joined the war effort as a consequence of his opposition to Fascism but was neither a Marxist productivist nor a modernist proponent of the cult



96. *PH-620*, by Clyfford Still. 1942. Canvas, 95.3 by 124.5 cm. (Clyfford Still Museum, Denver).

acquired during the War years appears the indispensable undergirding of his later accomplishments.

People rarely appear in these works, and when they do, as in *PH-625* of 1942, the human figures command less attention than the dazzling yellow cascade of welding sparks. The more encompassing view of the ship under construction in *PH-620* of that same year (Fig.96) demonstrates an ease at the rendering of the lattices of cranes and scaffolding and the balancing of diagonals. When looking at this canvas, one easily recognises the overcast sky of Northern California and almost hears the din of metal work and its acrid smells.

Yet 1942 also marks the year when this concreteness of reference becomes supplanted by a growing impulse towards abstraction. Coincidentally or not, this corresponded to the move of the artist and his family to Richmond, Virginia, in 1943. The paintings Still made during that year, and in the following one, reveal an alternation of styles that suggests a methodical search for his own artistic language by relentlessly trying out and discarding alternatives. In the second room of the exhibition devoted to these works, we see Still devising solutions, exploring figure/ground relations and working in a consistently abstract mode with biomorphic shapes and distended lines. *PH-35* of 1944 evokes the prow of a ship but utilises bands of brown and grey beneath a black background which leave no doubt about its increasingly jigsaw-like compositional strategy.

Many of the canvases from these years feature the stringy forms and dark backgrounds that predominate in Still's later work and evoke the shards of light piercing darkness which he could have seen in a film noir at his local cinema. By the third and final room of the exhibition the fusion of space and figure that defines Still's mature work was fully in evidence. In *PH-235* of 1944 (Fig.95), a black background is traversed by yellow, white, maroon and blue-grey shapes. It is twice as large as most of the other paintings in the exhibition and announces the comfort the artist had attained working on a large scale.

Not the least fascinating aspect of the exhibition was its inclusion of Still's magazine clippings about the War as well as his copy of a manual on shipbuilding. The relation of this material to his art, which the exhibition inaugurated as a topic for art-historical discussion, will surely be widely debated in the future. What remains undeniable is the rapid progress Still made during the War years, by the end of which his art was as formally advanced as that of any of his Abstract Expressionist colleagues. Jackson Pollock, a life-long admirer, once quipped that 'Still makes the rest of us look academic'. That to date the Clyfford Still Museum has exhibited less than twenty per cent of the 3,200 works in its collection makes it likely that surprises and discoveries lie ahead.

Mr Turner

by RICHARD GREEN

THE YEAR 2014 was for J.M.W. Turner an *annus mirabilis*, during which the artist and his work came to greater public prominence than ever before. In London there were two major exhibitions – *Turner and the Sea* at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, closing in April, just a few months before the opening of *Late Turner* at Tate Britain in September.¹ Fortuitously or otherwise, the latter, dealing with the final fifteen years of the artist's career, coincided with the release in Britain of Mike Leigh's long-awaited film about the painter, covering the last twenty-five years of his life.

Mr Turner is neither a presentation of Turner's art nor, as Leigh stresses, a 'biopic'. While a vast amount of detailed factual and anecdotal information, both reliable and questionable, relating to Turner's life is available – half-a-dozen or more biographies having been published – this material does not sustain a dramatic narrative. There is, in fact, little or no plot to the film, which is essentially an extended meditation on Turner the man, exploring his character through a series of carefully staged *tableaux* (in roughly but not strictly chronological sequence), based on either recorded events or reasonable hypotheses. They are punctuated by interludes in which a solitary Turner contemplates nature, for example in a Friedrich-like scene where he gazes from a cliff top across the sea to a roseate sky. The set pieces are at best loosely connected, but a thread running through them is Turner's total dependence on the three people closest to him – his

father, William, to whom he was devoted and who acted as studio factotum, Hannah Danby, Turner's loyal but taken-for-granted housekeeper, increasingly disfigured by psoriasis, and Sophia Booth, the Margate landlady who, in her second widowhood, became his mistress.

Among the most successful of the set pieces are those, near the beginning, at Petworth House, seat of Turner's patron Lord Egremont. Exceptionally in the film, they were shot at the actual location known to Turner and largely unchanged, while also being inspired by the astonishing series of watercolour and gouache studies on blue paper he made there in 1827. A glimpse of Turner painting in the Old Library is captured from the viewpoint of one of these small sketches (Figs.97 and 98). More loosely based on them is a candlelit musical soirée including a particularly risqué song, which perfectly conveys the spirit of liberality then prevailing at Petworth. As a setting, the picture gallery added by Turner to his house in Great Queen Street, London, plays a crucial role. Long since demolished, its recreation and hanging with appropriate canvases are a tour de force – made possible by the artist's own sketchbook plans, contemporary descriptions and two paintings, dating from after Turner's death, by George Jones.² Our introduction to this gallery is one of many captivating moments in the film. We join anonymous visitors who are kept waiting in a darkened anteroom by Turner's father so that they might more fully appreciate what is to come; as admission is finally granted, they step down into the gallery to be dazzled by the colour of the pictures illuminated by top lighting – while Turner watches through a spy hole. Subsequent visitors, received there by Turner,



97. *The Artist and his Admirers*, by J.M.W. Turner. 1827. Watercolour and bodycolour on blue paper, 13.8 by 19 cm. (Tate Britain, London).

¹ There was no catalogue.