

BEAUX ARTS

William Scott
Blue Yellow and Brown

1957

Oil on canvas

76.3 x 152.2 cm (30 x 60 inches)



Provenance: Private Collection. Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York 2004. Private Collection, UK. Offer Waterman

Exhibited: André Emmerich Gallery, New York, William Scott Paintings on paper and canvas, 1- 25 April 1992, No. 4

Denise Bibro Fine Art, New York, William Scott Works from the Scott Collection, 8 April – 5 June 2004, No.2, illustrated in colour

Literature: Dana Micucci, 'St Ives Modernists. British Painters of the 1950s Inspired by a Small Cornish Village', *Architectural Digest*, vol 54, no.8, August 1997, pp.124-5, illustrated in colour (upside down)

Norbert Lynton, *William Scott*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2004, pp. 198 – 9, 200 – 201, illustrated in colour

Sarah Whitfield, *William Scott, Catalogue Raisonné of Oil Paintings 1952-1959, Volume 2, 1952-1959*, cat no.356 illus colour p231

From Catalogue Raisonné (CR 356)

This painting was not exhibited during Scott's lifetime. It remained with the artist until gifted to the collector who sold it through Denise Bibro Fine art, New York, in June 2004. The title and date, which were supplied by the artists estate, appear for the first time in the records of the André Emmerich Gallery.

Writing about Scott's development in 1957 – 'from austerity and a degree of realism to a richer and almost abstract display of colour, form and paint' – Norbert Lynton points out that some of the 1957 paintings take this development a degree further: 'Possibly they were finished too late to be picked for the Biennale; Perhaps (Scott) was not sure of them, or the selectors were doubtful. In fact they mark a climax in his work. Blue, Yellow and Brown is an outstanding example. It is obviously a blue painting: four-fifths of it is the blue top; only a narrow band above it warrants the term "brown".

Yellow are the scrawls of paint, top centre, that bring light and life to three bowls, but allow glimpses of white and blue between the strokes. Much of the surface is given to white form, some opaque, other transparent, to strong black forms, and to blue/black sections in the top band. The blue of table is a broken surface, not only hinting at other colours beneath but also revealing other object-shapes in or beneath it, ghostlike forms that one senses before one sees them. The effect is luscious as well as mysterious, hinting at time, growth and decay.'

It was bought from Denise Bibro Fine Art by the collector who owned it at the time of writing.

Further Information

'It seems I paint the same subject whether it be still life, figure or landscape'

By 1957, William Scott was benefitting from commercial success both within the UK and overseas. In 1953, he joined Erica Brausen's Hanover Gallery and, in the same year, after a summer spent teaching in Canada, he returned home via New York, where art dealer Martha Jackson introduced him to New York's leading painters including Rothko, Kline, de Kooning and Pollock. The following year, Jackson became Scott's American dealer and so, by 1956, with the support of two galleries, he was able to give up teaching to concentrate on painting full time.

Still life emerged as the dominant theme in Scott's work as early as 1946. Norbert Lynton notes that in this year Scott had seen the exhibition 'A Thousand Years of Still Life Painting' in Paris and had been '...really overwhelmed by the fact that the subject had hardly changed for a thousand years, and yet each generation in turn expressed its own period and feelings within this terribly limited, narrow range of the still life.' 1

From this point, still life became the vehicle through which Scott explored the language of abstraction – it became, in Scott's words, the 'means to making a picture'. His motifs of pots, pans, knives, fish and fruit, typically reduced to their simplest forms and sometimes erotically suggestive, were arranged on tabletops which observed two competing perspectives. Objects were typically described as if from the side, with the tables tipped forwards as though seen from above – sometimes all four table legs were shown splayed out towards the edges of the canvas as one might expect to see in children's drawings, outsider and primitive art. As Scott suggests in his statement above, his treatment of landscape, still life and nude was interchangeable, the formal language of Table Still Life, 1951, (WS cat no.192), for example, a highly geometric composition in white, grey and black, is indistinguishable from the language used in three oils of Cornish harbours painted in the same period. In 1961, Scott explained in a lecture his interest in flattened perspective: 'For me the picture plane should never be destroyed. All kinds of pictures that I like in the world seem to be flat... I like the Byzantines, I like the early Italians, and then there are great gaps in my liking of painting until we come to Cézanne...The things in the picture now make

a complete whole, and the final image is the picture itself, not the things that have been painted.’ 2

Winter Still Life, 1956, (WS cat no.284), was Scott’s first still life painting to measure five feet across. Having progressed to this larger format, he painted a further 11 still lifes on this scale by the end of the year – eight of these were dominated by the dark blues seen in Winter Still Life, one was mostly brown and two were in a vivid orange-red, their surfaces brimming with objects. As a result of this new format, Scott’s brushwork became immediately looser and we observe a palpable shift in attention towards the painted surface, to textural mark-making, the layering of colour and the plastic qualities of paint.

Through 1957, Scott is clearly emboldened to experiment and his paintings from this year are notable for the wide variety of painterly strategies at play. In Liverpool Still Life, 1957, (WS cat no.332), there are, once again, a large arrangement of objects. The pots, pans and knife on the table remain mostly identifiable, while other forms are now developing into the simplified lozenges we see in the present painting – forms which Scott later suggested might unconsciously refer to the natural forms found in dry stone walls. As in Blue, Yellow and Brown, the format of Liverpool Still Life is elongated and there is a similar strip at the top of the composition to indicate the wall behind.

In some paintings from this year, the use of underlying layers of colour is more apparent. In Upright Abstract, 1957, (WS cat no.346), for example, a central section of vivid orange-red has been painted over in white, the white muffling the intensity of the ‘hot’ colour below.

When applied to his nudes, this notion of underlying layers seems to have a direct correlation to the depiction of skin and flesh. In some works we see Scott playfully balancing outlined and filled-in forms. In others, he inscribes fine lines into wet paint with the wrong end of a brush – a sculptural gesture which underlines the material nature of the paint. In the painting which immediately precedes Blue, Yellow and Brown in the catalogue raisonné, Still Life c.1957, (WS cat no.355), Scott adds an overarching structure of orange-red, as if a final web-like ‘drawing’ has been laid over the painted image.

Here Scott’s forms are soft and loose and there is an obvious pleasure in the poetic effects of colour and surface, untethered to subject matter. Writing about Scott’s development in 1957, ‘from austerity and a degree of realism to a richer and almost abstract display of colour, form and paint’, Norbert Lynton points out that some of Scott’s 1957 paintings take this development a degree further: ‘Possibly they were finished too late to be picked for the Biennale, perhaps [Scott] was not sure of them, or the selectors were doubtful. Blue, Yellow and Brown is an outstanding example. It is obviously a blue painting: four-fifths of it is the blue tabletop; only a narrow band above it warrants the term “brown”. Yellow are the scrawls of paint, top centre, that bring light and life to three bowls, but allow glimpses of white and blue between the strokes. Much of the surface is given to white forms, some opaque, others transparent, to two strong black forms, and to blue/black sections in the top band. The blue of the table is a broken surface, not only hinting at other object shapes in or beneath it, ghostlike forms that one senses before one sees them. The effect is luscious as well as mysterious, hinting at time, growth and decay.’ 3

The soft accretion of marks in Blue, Yellow and Brown and the delicate vibration of the

colours are perhaps unique in Scott's oeuvre and are particularly reminiscent of the technique of Pierre Bonnard. This work's panoramic format, exquisite blues and 'broken' daubs of colour also recall Monet's sequence of paintings *Les Nymphéas* (Water Lilies), eight of which are on permanent display at the Musée de l'Orangerie, Paris. Bonnard's tilted tabletops, such as the Tate's *Le Café*, 1915, and tipping bathroom floors, are a clear influence on Scott's still lifes and flattened-out nudes, as were the paintings of the untrained artist Alfred Wallis, whose work Scott came to know through frequent visits to Cornwall in the decade after the war. In the 1959 exhibition catalogue for Scott's exhibition at the Galerie Charles Lienhard in Zurich, Alan Bowness underlines the significance of French painting and Bonnard in particular for Scott's work:

'[Scott] has a strong sense of the past – both for the living tradition of Chardin, Corot, Cézanne and Bonnard to which he feels he belongs, and for the distant European past of the cave paintings and archaic Greek sculpture and Pompeian frescoes in which he sees the same strong sensual and plastic qualities, the combination of erotic and austere that he seeks in his own paintings. Of his immediate predecessors it is to Bonnard that he is most attracted. Scott regards him as the great master of twentieth century painting, whose influence can be seen in artists as different as Dubuffet and Rothko. Scott makes his pictures much as Bonnard did, composing with the same sort of feeling for the natural rhythms of the picture.' 4

1 Norbert Lynton, *William Scott*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2007, p61

2 Scott with Martin Attwood, Script for Recorded Illustrated Lecture, held in British Council Visual Arts Library, 1961

3 Sarah Whitfield, *William Scott Catalogue Raisonné of Oil Paintings 1952-1959*, Volume 2, 1952-1959, cat no.356 illus colour p231

4 Alan Bowness, exh. cat Galerie Charles Lienhard, Zurich, 1961, unpaginated