

Edgar Mansfield (1907 - 1996)

“Surely it is better to create tomorrow’s past than it is to repeat today’s”

Edgar Mansfield O.B.E. was born in London in 1907, emigrating and settling with his family in Hastings, New Zealand in 1911. Mansfield is internationally regarded as one of New Zealand’s finest artists and bookbinders, but he was also a designer, a philosopher and a teacher.

He studied at the King Edward Technical College in Dunedin and in 1934, Mansfield made the decision to return to London to further his studies in crafts and creative design. However, he remained critical of the London colleges, writing “No one had done anything since they obtained a diploma and began to teach their non-productive teachers’ theories”. Inspired by Cubism and Surrealism, Mansfield’s bookbinding and sculpting style was influenced by Picasso, Paul Klee, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, with an emphasis on fluid lines and what Edgar called his ‘scribble’ designs. He was again dismayed that no-one in the English art schools had heard of these artists or failed to appreciate them. When it came to bookbinding, he was unconcerned with the quality of the printing he bound and preferred to use unpolished, blemished goatskin from Nigeria, highlighting imperfections in the leather and even adding his own ink markings if necessary.

After serving during the second world war, he began teaching at the London College of Printing between 1948 and 1964, where a distinct Mansfield style developed among his students at the college. After his teaching days, Mansfield, frustrated by the ‘dirty buildings and the atmosphere and the noise’ of London, returned to the Hawkes Bay where he embarked on his sculptural artistry. When it came to sculpture, pieces of driftwood often inspired his work, carving and adding to their form until it was satisfactory. Mansfield moved away from bookbinding in his later years as he focused on sculpture due to his deteriorating eye-sight. It is clear in his sculptural work the influences of artists such as Hepworth and Moore are present with their flowing organic forms.

Despite being born in England and spending much of his career in London, Mansfield considered himself ‘a New Zealander through and through’. He became the first president of the British Guild of Contemporary Bookbinders (1955-1968) and became a fellow of the Royal Society of British Sculptors in 1980. In 1978 he was honoured with the first exhibition devoted to a living bookbinder at the Victoria and Albert Museum London and awarded an O.B.E a year later for his services to bookbinding and sculpture.

Will Kelly

References:

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