

STELLA
LANGDALE

ARTIST AND
ILLUSTRATOR
1880-1976



MYTH AND MAGIC

An Exhibition at the
Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery
University of Victoria

November 1989 to January 1990

INTRODUCTION

When Stella Langdale arrived in Victoria in 1939, printmaking as a creative art form was all but unknown. During her brief six year stay she was, however, incredibly active. She travelled in British Columbia sketching and painting. Her Okanagan, Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island landscapes, evocative studies of light and landforms, were exhibited in Vancouver and Victoria. A small collection of her own aquatints and etchings, the creative side of her 25 year career as an illustrator for major publishers and journals, laid the foundation for the collections of what would become the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

She made numerous friends, and after leaving to retire in California, kept up an extended correspondence with members of the local arts community. In that correspondence she reveals a continuing attachment to Victoria as a sort of second or adopted home. There seems little doubt that the reasons for this were both artistic and spiritual. In artistic terms Victoria was a late expression of her own British arts-and-crafts roots. In spiritual matters, she was very close to her friend and contemporary, Katharine Maltwood, who arrived in Victoria the same year. The Maltwoods were at the centre of a small group of intimates who looked for a rebirth of western civilization in America, a rebirth based on spiritual enlightenment drawn from wisdom deposited in the myths of the great world religions.

Irene Stella Rolf Langdale was born in Middlesex, England, in 1880. Her father, Marmaduke Langdale, was a noted and successful landscape painter who exhibited often at the Royal Academy. She studied at the Brighton School of Art and then from 1907 to 1910 enrolled in life classes at the Glasgow School of Art.

Her friend and mentor, Katharine E. Maltwood, wrote of her: "She has been trained in the hard school which considered anatomy, drawing, construction, composition and technique as essential to art." The Glasgow School of Art was one of the best and most influential schools of the time. Among her teachers was the charismatic director of the school, Francis Newbery. Newbery was a demanding teacher who attracted leading lecturers to Glasgow and was a painter himself. From 1880 to 1910, the school developed what is now called the Glasgow School style, which was shared by painters, sculptors, architects and designers alike. Thanks to the wealth of the city and the enlightened activity of some collectors and art dealers, Glasgow and its art school were the rallying points for young artists against the constrictions of academic art. Langdale was therefore exposed to a heady mixture of realistic impressionism: James Guthrie, WY MacGregor, John Lavery, E.A. Hornel, George Henry, and others. The Glasgow School's pioneer design work must also have provided a welcome inspiration, especially creations by Charles Rennie MacKintosh, the architect and design genius who established connections with the Vienna Secessionists, and whose exquisitely classical draughtmanship tamed the excesses and foibles of the Art Nouveau style. In him, Langdale may have felt a kindred spirit.

Also from the 1880s on, the artists of the Glasgow school adopted among their major influences the phenomena of Orientalism and Celtism or Scottish Romanticism. Celtism was to play an essential part in Stella Langdale's work and provided a lasting theme in her art. As Celtic carvings had been the source of the imagery for Hornel's and Henry's collaborative work *The Druids* of 1890, likewise King Arthur's castle of Tintagel was to honour several of Langdale's lithographs. She also analyzed and wrote extensively about Celtic legends and explored parallels with other ancient myths of both western and eastern civilizations. Her correspondence shows that Langdale's aesthetic research was

inseparable from a metaphysical quest for unity. She felt that modern civilization had fractured this fundamental cultural unity and that her artistic work was to recover some of that "wholeness," a concern shared by most European Romantics.

Langdale was a dedicated and sensitive traveller. These travels provided her with a pleasant life-style as well as the means to compare, analyze, and reconcile syncretically different geographical and cultural phenomena. Greece, Italy, North Africa and the south of France became her favourite wandering fields. Greece and Italy contained the wellsprings of modern civilization; the spacious deserts of North Africa aroused in her the contemplative and idealistic feelings proper to the Islamic faith.

Friendship with the Maltwoods and failing health brought her to North America in 1939; to Victoria first, then in 1946 to Santa Barbara, California, where she died in 1976. Langdale went on cultivating her taste for British Columbia primal nature, the vast expanse of territories, the endless shifting light of the Northwest, then discovering the old native cultures of the Southwest American Plains: Hopis, Zunis, Taos... for whom she felt much attraction and respect.

Another major component of Stella Langdale's art was music. A pianist herself from age sixteen, she spent her life with companion Florence Baynham, a musician and composer. Many titles reveal a musical mood or inspiration: *Moonlight Sonata*, *Chopin Funeral March*, *Movement Moonlight*. Her favourite composer seems to have been Beethoven. She followed the Symbolist tradition of associating music with the visual arts, a tradition which found its apogee with the Kandinsky's paintings of the 1910s. But she was fond of ethnic music as well. One can almost feel it recalled in the mood of many of her North African landscapes.

CHARCOAL DRAWINGS

Works in different media attest to Langdale's proficiency and versatility: charcoal drawings, lithographs and etchings, oil paintings, book illustrations. The charcoal drawings illustrate best her powerful talent in representing architectural mass and form on a two dimensional surface. Critics have called lyrical and idealistic these landscapes or views which rely on a strong sense of design and composition. Like the 19th century British landscape painter Samuel Palmer, Langdale emphasizes and uses line to create tonal effects of light and dark contrasts. Also like him, she obtains remarkable effects of texture and luminosity within the structure of a rigorous outline. Both artists have a noticeable reverence for nature, a certain religious indifference and the same fondness for Italy and old monuments and temples.

Temple of Mercury, *St. Francis Assisi*, *El Kantara*, are elegies to Greece, Italy and the desert cities of North Africa. She also drew natural spectacles from the south of France, with their impressive verticality, as illustrated by *Les Gorges du Tarn*.

PRINTS

Some of Langdale's best work are her many etchings and aquatints, for which she was equally appreciated and known. She belonged to the Senefelder Group, a London-based club founded in 1908, whose aim was to encourage artistic lithography. She became very proficient in aquatints, an etching process on copper utilizing a resinous solution and nitric acid, which produces effects resembling those of ink or watercolor drawing. Many of Langdale's seascapes and desert scenes were created by this method: *The Lone Shirling*, *The Black Waters O' Dee*, *The*

List of works by Stella Langdale on display in the exhibition:
MYTH AND MAGIC: STELLA LANGDALE 1880-1976
held at the Maltwood Art Musum and Gallery
November 19, 1989 - January 7, 1990

Works in the collection of the Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery :

| | | |
|------------|--|---------------------|
| U985.1.2 | Boats in Oak Bay | oil on canvas board |
| U985.1.7 | Kelowna | oil on canvas |
| U985.1.4 | Untitled | oil on board |
| M964.1.128 | The Roofs of Tunis | oil on canvas board |
| M964.1.130 | Mountain covered by snow | oil on board |
| | View of Mount Baker | oil on canvas board |
| U985.1.1 | Incarnation of the Snow | ink on paper |
| U985.1.5 | The Lone Shirling (sic) | ink on paper |
| U985.1.6 | Gipsy Caravans | ink on paper |
| U985.22.1 | The Black Waters O'Del | ink on paper |
| U985.1.11 | Illustration for "Hound of Heaven" | ink on paper |
| U985.1.10 | Illustration for "The Ancient Mariner" | ink on paper |
| M964.1.132 | Via San Giovanni, Latuano, Rome | charcoal drawing |
| M964.1.133 | Untitled | charcoal drawing |
| M964.1.127 | Arab Tents in the Desert - Biskra - "The Garden of Allah" | aquatint |
| M964.1.129 | Nocturne | aquatint |

Works on loan from the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria:

| | | |
|----------|---|------------------|
| 9999.246 | Untitled | oil on canvas |
| 54.12 | Assisi - Moonlight | charcoal drawing |
| 62.123 | St. Francis Assisi | charcoal drawing |
| 62.124 | Church, formerly Pagan Temple near Perugia | charcoal drawing |
| 62.126 | Untitled | charcoal drawing |
| 62.127 | Untitled | charcoal drawing |
| 61.128 | Baths of Caracalla, Rome | charcoal drawing |
| 62.129 | Temple of Mercury | charcoal drawing |
| 55.30 | Fishing craft at Viareggio | charcoal drawing |
| 9999.248 | Crucifixion | charcoal drawing |
| 9999.218 | Sion | sketch/pencil |
| 9999.221 | Third Movement of the Moonlight Sonata | ink on paper |
| 62.132 | The Fountain | charcoal drawing |
| 9999.219 | Untitled | charcoal drawing |
| 62.133 | El Kantara - The Gate of the Desert | charcoal drawing |

| | | |
|----------|--|------------|
| 999.238 | Oh Wild West Wind - Shelly | etching |
| 9999.234 | River in Spate | etching |
| 9999.233 | Chobham Common - England | etching |
| 9999.225 | A Canal - Venice | etching |
| 9999.223 | Will O' the Wisp | etching |
| 9999.224 | The Call (fan) | aquatint |
| 9999.226 | Egyptian fan | aquatint |
| 9999.244 | Untitled (fan) | aquatint |
| 9999.241 | East | aquatint |
| 9999.232 | King Arthur's Castle, Tintagel | aquatint |
| 9999.220 | Village Range, El Kantara "Mouth of the Desert" | aquatint |
| 9999.237 | Moonlight | aquatint |
| 9999.222 | The Moonlight Sonata, II Movement | etching |
| 9999.240 | Chopin - Funeral March | etching |
| 9999.230 | Sion | lithograph |

Private Collection:

Lost City of Atlantis oil on canvas

Illustrated books:

Symphonie Symbolique by Edmund John.
Publishers: Erskine Macdonald, London, 1919.

Hound of Heaven by Francis Thompson.
Publishers: Dodd Mead, New York, 1922

The Rise of the Ancient Mariner by Samuel Coleridge.
Publishers: Little Leather Library, New York. n.d.

Christ in Hades by Stephen Phillips.
Publishers: John Lane, London & New York, 1917.

Incarnation of Snow, Bistra, The Garden of Allah. These works display an impressionistic shimmering of light comparable to her charcoal drawings. With *Ei Kantara, The Gates of the Desert* in fan-shaped designs, the effect is more of a slow, quiet and rhythmical hypnosis inherent to the Sahara environment and the wandering caravans.

ILLUSTRATIONS

The Ancient Mariner, by Coleridge, and *The Hound of Heaven* by Francis Thompson are the best known illustration works by Langdale. For twenty-five years, until the 1940s, she illustrated books for the John Lane Publishing Company in London and received praises in literary reviews for her illustrations of *The Hound of Heaven*, a Christian mystical poem. Here, another aspect of Langdale's talent surfaces: an ability to mix her classical design training with the sinuous whiplash curves of Art Nouveau. But beyond, we cannot ignore the shadow of the visionary William Blake, with his swirls, vortexes of energy and light radiating from human and angelic bodies. The illustrations for the *Hound of Heaven* reflect a symbolist aesthetic and are reminiscent of Katharine Maltwood's figural forms.

OIL PAINTINGS

In her few oil paintings, Langdale followed a post-impressionistic direction, with a special interest in unusual light effects. However, a piece like *Boats in Oak Bay*, a Victoria scene, still demonstrates a disciplined linear structure. Others, such as *Mountain Covered with Snow*, are very close to Group of Seven work. But Langdale resisted attempts towards more abstraction. Instead, she was searching for the essence of light as an expression of mood and geography. In her writings she ponders the specific differences between the northern light in Victoria and Venetian light.

POETRY AND LETTERS

We should not ignore Stella Langdale's taste and talent for writing. Had she not travelled, her art might have been more closely tied to literature. She was a fascinating story teller, and she trusted, above all, the faculty of imagination. She gave old legends sap and life, exploring the roots of the medieval mythology and fairy tales, bringing back the "mystical Sidhe" to our contemporary memories. Her syncretic mind was continually looking for a bridge between our state of civilization that she was not fond of, referring to "the starved rationalism," and a Golden Age encompassing Atlantis and the old Celtic world. In her surviving letters to the Maltwoods and MacDonalds, we easily perceive her zest for life, her faithful qualities as a friend, her humorous but proud challenge to keep open "the doors of perceptions" against the narrowness of the modern mind. Certainly she did not welcome that form of modernity which does not differentiate between illusion and reality. She made clear that her art tries to capture some lost fragments, a little like Isis putting Osiris back together, because as she says, "It is a great thing to find strange or broken fragments, of things that really are." This spiritual liberation from reality that the symbolist and surrealist artists endeavoured to reveal by eccentric and manipulated imagery, Stella Langdale also accomplished with her visual imagination, cross-cultural faith, and a gentle, inquisitive mind. As Katharine Maltwood remarked some forty years ago, "she was a visionary of idealistic and spiritual allegiance."

THE MALTWOOD COLLECTION

Creative and independent-minded women, Stella Langdale and Katharine Maltwood became friends in the days of Maltwood's London studio, in the 1920s. They came to Canada about the same time. After settling in Victoria, Katharine and John Maltwood patronized local artists, that included Inna Uthoff, Hildegard Wyllie, Charles John Collins, Elizabeth Duer, and Langdale herself. Langdale and Maltwood shared much in common. Beyond their initial interest in the Arts and Crafts movement and their mutual distaste for abstraction, they were both committed to exploring the lost cultural roots of the modern era, and devoted much of their artistic energy to heal the fracture they sensed between the past and the present. For this purpose, they used similar means: travels, study of Celticism or esoteric teachings (Egyptian, Kabbalian, for example), and of Asian modes of thinking, particularly Buddhism, "closest to Langdale's heart." They felt a mutual admiration for each other and warm friendship, cemented by the same sense of cultural and metaphysical destiny. In her correspondence with the Maltwoods, Stella Langdale speaks freely of a variety of subjects: West Coast primal nature, the Zodiac, matters of health, and the sadness she felt in seeing Katharine Maltwood incapacitated as a sculptor because of failing health. John and Katharine Maltwood purchased her work from 1940 to 1946.

THE McDONALD COLLECTION DONATED TO THE MALTWOOD MUSEUM AND GALLERY

Stella Langdale enjoyed a humorous and carefree friendship with another Victoria couple, John Alexander (Don) and Gertrude (Scuffles) McDonald, who were originally from Scotland. In her letters to them, she exchanges anecdotes on literary and historical subjects, cures for colds, and jokes. They sent books to one another and Langdale's letters are divided between philosophical moods, cross-cultural insights, and, towards the end, the subject of growing old gracefully. These letters reveal the events and pattern of her life in Santa Barbara, California, where she found refuge against a rheumatic condition. Although she was known to be aloof and self-contained to outsiders, her feelings for the McDonalds were spontaneous and affectionate. At the same time, she reveals to them her weariness about old age, and her basic bohemian unconventionality: "Finally, what is important is how much dope you have" (to alleviate suffering). The McDonalds collected prints and aquatints from her, a few charcoal drawings, and also a copy of her illustrated works for *The Hound of Heaven* and *The Ancient Mariner*. Gertrude McDonald donated the work to the Maltwood Museum and Art Gallery in 1979, followed by a further donation by her daughter, Beth McDonald.

THE ART GALLERY OF GREATER VICTORIA COLLECTION

The Art Gallery of Greater Victoria collection includes a large number of charcoal drawings and etchings from exotic locales such as Greece, Italy, Egypt and North Africa, and one oil painting of Canada or Switzerland. These were left in care of the Gallery from the time of her departure to Santa Barbara in 1947, and also from her 1954 exhibit at the AGGV.

Langdale had an ongoing cooperation with the institution when it was still called the Arts Centre. In 1951 she donated her

father's prize-winning work *The Tintagel Castle*. She went to great pains to bring this Turner Gold Medal painting from England, and offered it as a symbolic gift of appreciation to Canada and its nascent culture, a gift similar in intention to Katharine Maltwood's *Glastonbury Zodiac*, offered to the University of Victoria. Like Maltwood, she was disillusioned with Europe, Great Britain in particular, and placed high hopes in Canada's less conservative policies towards artists or alternative thinkers. This may be why her work was left as a tacit legacy to Victoria, rather than donated to the United States where she retired and died.

Exhibition credits:

Curator: Martin Segger
Curatorial Assistant: Jacqueline Menard
Research Assistant: Joan Ryan
Registrar: Barbara Jackson
Installation: Robert Battacchio

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LIST OF PUBLISHED BOOKS ILLUSTRATED:

Aitchison, George. *Unknown Brighion*. John Lane, 1926.
Coleridge, Samuel T. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Little Leather Library, New York.
Cunningsby, Dawson. *The Little House*. London and New York: John Lane, 1920.
John, Edmund. *Symphonic Symbolique*. London: Erskine Macdonald, 1919.
Newman, John Henry, Cardinal. *The Dream of Gerontius*. London and New York: John Lane, 1916.
Phillips, Stephen. *Christ in Hades*. London and New York: John Lane, 1917.
Thompson, Francis. *Hound of Heaven*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1922.
Various illustrations for *COLOUR* magazine, 1930s, and *STUDIO MAGAZINE*.

LIST OF POEMS AND ARTICLES WRITTEN BY STELLA LANGDALE:

1. ARTICLES AND WRITINGS:

Aquatints for International Print and Printmakers.
from *Archival Material*, n.d. clipping file, MAMAG.
San Francisco del Deserto. Unpublished MS, No. 10 MAMAG.
The Marble Steps (unpublished MS, No. 29, MAMAG).
Fishing Boats at Viareggio (unpublished MS, No. 4, MAMAG).
Venice (unpublished MS, No. 34, MAMAG).
Light at Sunset, Victoria Harbour (unpublished MS, No. 18, MAMAG).
San Vigilio, Lake Garda (unpublished MS, No. 7, MAMAG).
The Steps in Hadrian's Villa, Tivoli, near Rome (unpublished MS, No. 5, MAMAG).
Assisi, The Cloisters (unpublished MS, No. 8, MAMAG).
El Kantara, the gate of the desert (unpublished MS, No. 32, MAMAG).
Lost Atlantis (unpublished MS, No. 31, MAMAG).
The Clipper Hulls (unpublished MS, No. 23, MAMAG).
Here leaps ashore the full South West (unpublished MS, No. 6, MAMAG).

2. LETTERS

Letters to John A. and Gertrude K. MacDonald (MAMAG).
Letters to John and Katharine E. Maltwood (MAMAG).
Letter to Editor of Scottish magazine (possibly *Scottish Field*) (unpublished MS, MAMAG).

3. POEMS

The seat of Mars (*Kelowna Gazette*, undated, MAMAG)
Love Story (unpublished MS, MAMAG)
Wanderer in the night (unpublished MS, MAMAG)
Farewell to the "Sir Thomas Lipton" (*Daily Colonist*, clipping file, MAMAG)

CORRESPONDENTS TO THANK:

Ann Forsdyke, voluntary assistant, Department Prints and Drawings, British Museum, London.
Sarah Macdonald, Research Assistant, Library, Royal Academy of Arts, London.
Ian C. Moeie, Principal Librarian, Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow.
Deborah Sugg, Curator, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Hugh T. Stevenson, Assistant Keeper, Department Fine Art, Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.
Ian Thom, Senior Curator, Vancouver Art Gallery.
Moira Thundor, Curator of the Print Room, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Philip Vainker, Keeper of Fine Art, Art Gallery and Museums and the Royal Pavilion, Brighton.

LIST OF LENDERS:

Art Gallery of Greater Victoria
Mrs. E. Page

EXHIBITIONS:

Royal Society of Artists, Birmingham, n.d.
Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts, Glasgow, n.d.
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, n.d.
Manchester City Art Gallery, Manchester, n.d.
Royal Scottish Academy, Edinburgh, n.d.
Brighton Arts Club and Sussex Art Club: 1921, 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926.
The International, London, n.d.
The Salon, Paris, n.d.
The Print Society, London, n.d.
The R.I.B.A., London, January 1940.
The Little Centre, Victoria, Nov 19 - Dec. 1, 1946
The Vancouver Art Gallery, April 1941, April 1943, March 1947.
The Art Centre, Victoria, April 1951, September 1954
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1950
Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, February 1988.

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Brown, Rosemary. *Katharine Emma Maltwood Artist 1878 - 1961*. Catalogue, Maltwood Art Museum and Gallery, Victoria: Sono Nis, 1981.
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Lister, Raymond. *Samuel Palmer and the Ancients*. Cambridge: Fitzwilliam Museum, 1984.
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Martin, David. *The Glasgow School of Painting*. Edinburgh: P. Harris, 1976.
Palmer, Samuel. *Selected writings: the Parting Light*. Manchester: Carcanet with Midnag, 1985.
Santa Barbara News. "Langdale." Santa Barbara: December 4, 1955.
Tuele, Nicolas. *Stella Langdale's Romantic Vision*. Exhibit catalogue. Victoria: the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, February 1988.