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THE  TIMES**Stephen Gilbert**January 15, 1910 - January 12, 2007
Published at 12:00AM, January 19 2007

Artist who was celebrated on the Continent for his postwar metaphors for human conflict

The painter, sculptor and architectural designer Stephen Gilbert was perhaps the only British artist to be fully embraced by the Parisian avant-garde. As one of the very few British artists to find fame and fortune abroad, his long and innovative career has been somewhat overlooked in Britain.

He was born in 1910 in Fife, the grandson of Sir Alfred Gilbert, the celebrated Victorian Art Nouveau sculptor of “Eros” (more accurately, the Angel of Christian Charity) in Piccadilly. He gained a scholarship in architecture to the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 1929 where he met the painter Roger Hilton who would become a lifelong friend.

Encouraged by Sir Henry Tonks, the Slade’s principal, Gilbert turned to painting and won the Slade Scholarship at the end of his first year in 1930. He exhibited with the London Group in 1933, in the Royal Academy show of 1936 and had his first one-man show at the Wertheim Gallery in 1938.

Gilbert and his wife, the sculptor Jocelyn Chewett, whom he had married in 1935, moved in 1937 to Paris where Chewett had recently completed her sculptural apprenticeship to the sculptor Ossip Zadkine. Obligated by the outbreak of war to flee, they moved to Ireland. Invalided out of active service, Gilbert spent the war in relative isolation in the countryside just outside Dublin, and developed a personal, expressionistic idiom that responded directly to the anxieties of that time.

The White Stag group of refugee artists in Dublin, including two pupils of the French Cubist painter Albert Gleizes, Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone, offered a cosmopolitan point of contact and facilitated early exhibitions of Gilbert’s new painting. Influenced by Jung and Nietzsche, his work of this period is characterised by fantastical creatures, vegetation and devouring insects painted in vivid oils. While on one level the paintings are obviously a response to the emotional turbulence of the war, they are also powerful metaphors for the ever-present, internal human conflict.

In 1946 Gilbert returned to Paris. He exhibited at the Salon des Surindépendants in 1948, where his work was noticed by Asger Jorn, who had just formed the CoBrA group with Appel, Constant, Corneille, Altan and Alechinsky. The group’s painting paralleled the US Action Painters and Abstract Expressionists in their pursuance of unconscious gesture and image and bore a striking affinity to the work executed by Gilbert five years before.

Jorn invited Gilbert to join the group and they travelled with their families through a devastated Germany, to Copenhagen, where Gilbert spent a month with Jorn and the critic Christian Dotremont, completing a mural in a house which the CoBrA artists were decorating.

After exhibiting at the second CoBrA exhibition in 1949 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, where he became friends with the Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, Gilbert moved away from the CoBrA group, being the first of these artists to cast aside vigorous figuration in favour of abstraction. From 1952 he simplified his means, painting colourful and reductive designs of elemental shapes in impasto textures. Exhibiting regularly with the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Gilbert found a place in the vanguard of continental artists who, in the spirit of postwar optimism, looked to the idealist Modernism of the 1920s.

Gilbert also began to explore the possibilities of three-dimensional form. His metal constructions from the 1950s are an articulation of his ambition to, in his own words, “put colour into space”. As well as exhibiting regularly at the Salon de la Jeune Sculpture, Gilbert became a member of the Groupe Espace from 1954 and was a co-founder of the Néovision group.

Increasingly interested in modernist architecture, he was introduced by Hilton to the experimental architect Peter Stead. In 1955-56 Gilbert spent time in Huddersfield where he worked with Stead on a series of remarkable but unrealised architectural proposals.

From 1957 Gilbert developed a series of curvilinear structures which, by using polished metal surfaces, reflect light back on to themselves so the sculpture is constantly changing and dematerialising its perceived form. These works were exhibited at the Drian Galleries in London in 1961 and in exhibitions of the British Constructionist Group.

Gilbert’s work remained distinct in its intuitive consciousness of the manmade world of constructed environments, of machines and of shapes determined by speed and movement. “Art must have a parallel with the tenor of your particular epoch,” he said. “If you don’t succeed in reflecting this, a vital element is missing.”

In addition to two public commissions in London, international recognition came with a Gulbenkian award in 1962 and the Biennale de Tokyo in 1965.

After the death of his wife in 1979 Gilbert's sculpture became increasingly self-contained and gestured towards an act of affiliation to his wife's restrained and subtle unified forms.

Gilbert's work is housed in private and public collections, including the Tate in England, the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris and the CoBrA museum in Amsterdam. Belated recognition came with the exhibition *Paris-Paris* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1981, which revived knowledge of the cultural life in Paris and France during the period from 1937 to 1957, and the subsequent exhibition at the Barbican Centre in London in 1982, *Aftermath: France 1945-54*.

Gilbert's creative partnership with Chewett was celebrated by the recent exhibition *The Sculpture of Stephen Gilbert and Jocelyn Chewett in Post-War Paris* at the Henry Moore Institute in 2006.

Gilbert is survived by his son and daughter.

Stephen Gilbert, painter and sculptor, was born on January 15, 1910. He died on January 12, 2007, aged 96

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