

Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red 1943

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Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red (BH 118) is one of the earliest examples of Hepworth's carved and stringed sculptures, and the only one to include different coloured strings. Created under difficult circumstances during the Second World War, it holds a particular place within Hepworth's biography as well as marking significant shifts within her artistic practice.

In 1939, on the brink of the Second World War, Hepworth moved with her young family – including four-year-old triplets – from their home and her established studio in London to the relative safety of Cornwall, fearful of the expected bombing of the capital.¹ Hepworth reflected in 1952 on the impact political events had on her practice at this time, '*by early 1939 the Spanish War, Munich, and the ever increasing threat of a European war not only absorbed most people's energy, but it seemed to extinguish for a while the interest which had been growing during the previous years. From late 1938 until war was declared it became increasingly difficult to sell a painting or a sculpture and make a bare living.*'² The upheaval of moving amidst the outbreak of war disrupted the networks Hepworth had been establishing throughout the 1930s in very practical ways. She wrote to Ernest Musgrave, the Director of Wakefield Art Gallery on 13th October 1939, '*I left my studio before war broke out & many letters have gone astray*'.³

In her 1970 autobiography, Hepworth recalled '*I did the maquette for the first sculpture with colour, and when I took the children to Cornwall five days before war was declared, I took the maquette with me, also my hammer and a minimum of stone carving tools.*'⁴ The maquette mentioned is the plaster carving *Sculpture with Colour* (BH113 A), which is distinct from *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* in several ways. Smaller in size, images also reveal an inner 'bridge', akin to the bridge of a stringed instrument, through which the strings pass from the outer aperture to the closed point at the end of the ovoid. In Hepworth's sculpture records BH113 A is given the additional subtitle '*white, blue with red strings*',⁵ suggesting that the strings were solely red, instead of the red and white in *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red*.

Initially the Hepworth-Nicholson family stayed with friends Margaret Mellis and Adrian Stokes for several months at their house Little Park Owles in Carbis Bay, before moving to a small house of their own named Dunluce on 27 December 1939. Hepworth had no studio space, and limited access to materials, curtailing her ability to work, as she recalled, '*I could only draw at night and make a few plaster maquettes. The day was*

¹ In November 1940, Hepworth's studio was hit in the bombing of London, and some works damaged.

² *Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1952), section 3.

³ Letter from Hepworth to Ernest Musgrave, 13th October 1939, Wakefield Art Gallery Archive held at The Hepworth Wakefield. She continues, '*Unfortunately my work has been evacuated by kind friends & is now spread out in different places from Cornwall to Cumberland.*'

⁴ *Carvings and Drawings*, section 3.

⁵ Hepworth created the 'sculpture records' in the early 1950s, providing detailed records of her sculptures up to this point, and continuing through to the end of her life. There are two sets held in public institutions, one at The Hepworth Wakefield Archive, the other in Tate Archive.

filled with running a nursery school, double-cropping a tiny garden for food, and trying to feed and protect the children.’⁶ She made numerous crystalline paintings of drawn graphite lines and gouache colours which she described as ‘*my sculptures born in the disguise of 2 dimensions*’⁷. Several of these even incorporate string, as she wrote to Leslie Martin in 1940, ‘*I am sending by registered post tomorrow 3 gouache and 3 “gouache and string” ... the strings are of course halfway between the ptgs & sculpture*’.⁸ These seem to relate to the development of her use of strings in her plaster sculptures of this time (including BH113 and also BH117A-E).

Through the war years Hepworth adapted her working practice to accommodate the domestic and parental claims on her time, as she wrote to her friend, the critic E. H. Ramsden, ‘*I’ve slowly discovered how to create for 30 mins, cook for 40 mins, create for another 30 & look after children for 50 & so on through the day. It’s a sort of miracle to be able to do it – I think the secret lies in not resisting the chores & drudgery & in carrying the creative mood on within oneself while cooking so that it’s unbroken. Rilke helps too (most grand & beautiful work don’t you think?) reading him I’m immediately in the right frame of mind. Normally I used to need 8 hrs continuous work to really create something*’.⁹ Her use of plaster for the sculptures in the early years of the war was also a necessity, as she wrote in 1940, ‘*material is almost impossible to get hold of – maybe that in itself will produce new ideas and vitality*’.¹⁰ It is notable that Hepworth paints the outer shell of the first two wood carvings to be made after this period in white, obscuring the wood, perhaps a product of several years making sculpture solely in (white) plaster.

The starkness of the white in contrast to its internal colours of red and blue also recalls Hepworth’s impression of Piet Mondrian, whom she had first met in 1935 during a trip to Paris. She offers a vivid description of his studio at that time, ‘*Inside the studio everything gleamed with whiteness. The walls, furniture, easels, were all immaculate with white paint – except I remember, for a blue box and a red gramophone. Far up on the white walls were placed different sized rectangles of primary colours, red, yellow, and blue, all movable and all placed with conscious visual purpose*’.¹¹ After visiting his studio at that time, Hepworth had been inspired to paint the Mall Studio white. In 1938 Mondrian had moved to London fleeing the war in Europe, and Nicholson had found him a studio just round the corner from the Mall Studios. Mondrian wrote on 30th September, ‘*First I would thank you and Barbara so much for having lend me the bed. Gabo and his wife has helped me to buy the rest, copboard etc. The whiting has very well*

⁶ *Pictorial Autobiography*, p. 42.

⁷ Letter from Hepworth to E. H. Ramsden, undated [June 1943, re. Temple Newsam exhibition], TGA 9310.1.1.20.

⁸ Letter from Hepworth to Leslie Martin, GMA A70/2/19/2 Professor Sir Leslie Martin Archive, National Galleries of Scotland, GMA A70, reproduced and quoted in A. Strang ‘Form and Colour: Friendship, Patronage and Collaboration between Barbara Hepworth, Leslie Martin and Sadie Speight’, Hepworth Research Network Papers: <https://hepworthwakefield.org/our-story/hepworth-research-network/papers/> accessed 19.01.2025

⁹ Letter from Hepworth to Ramsden, undated [late November 1941?], TGA 9310.1.1.7

¹⁰ Letter from Hepworth to Ramsden, undated [date of 1940 suggested by Alan Bowness] TGA 9310.1.1.3

¹¹ *Carvings and Drawings*, section 3.

succeeded.¹² Hepworth remembered Mondrian recreating the magic of his Parisian studio, 'starting from an old grey room in a Victorian house and buying cheap unpainted furniture in Camden Town. Very soon the same intensity and clarity of whiteness glowed in his new surroundings.'¹³

By 1943, the Hepworth-Nicholson family had moved into a larger house in Carbis Bay called Chy-an-Kerris, coinciding with a return to carving in wood for Hepworth. In a letter to Ramsden dated 28th April 1943 from Chy-an-Kerris Hepworth writes, 'Just started a new carving and some new drawings. Feel rested.'¹⁴ The carving could refer to *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* because the previous work listed in the 1943 sculpture record, *Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red) 1943*, was already finished as it was included in Hepworth's Temple Newsam exhibition which ran from 24th April – 13th June of that year. However, Hepworth could equally be referring to an unrealised or later discarded work in her letter.¹⁵ Although there was now space to carve, a letter to Nicholson visiting London in late summer that year reveals Hepworth's struggle to find suitable carving material. She writes, 'could you please, dear, ring up Howard's (Timber Merchants) off Tott. Court Road as soon as you get this letter & tell them I've got a permit for English Hardwood stamped area 7 & ask if this means I can buy from them or not. Please send me a P.C. [post card] by return.'¹⁶

At the start of the Second World War, Britain produced only five per cent of its own timber. Wood was soon recognised as a valuable resource for the Western Front, being used to make everything from telegraph poles and fencing to pit props and charcoal for explosives. By late 1942, domestic production of timber had risen to 60 per cent after 524,000 acres of woodland were felled. This was in large part due to the establishment of the Home Timber Production Department in October 1940 who operated under the Ministry of Supply to coordinate timber production. The Women's Land Army recruited 1000 women into special forestry departments in England and Wales during the early years of the war, known colloquially as 'Lumber Jills'. Timber Control Area Offices across Britain regulated wood usage through the issuing of permits.¹⁷

In her next letter to Nicholson, Hepworth notes, 'The outlook for my wood looks bad. I can get the wood but seasoned wood is extinct. Newly felled timber with split to hell. Therefore it's very important to get any seasoned wood I have in the Mall sent down

¹² Quoted in Sophie Bowness, 'Mondrian in London: Letters to Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 132, no. 1052 (November 1990): 783.

¹³ *Carvings and Drawings*, section 3.

¹⁴ Letter from Hepworth to Ramsden, dated 28 April [1943], TGA 9310.1.1.16.

¹⁵ This also assumes the sculptures are listed in the records in the order in which they were made, which, though the intention, is not always reliably the case.

¹⁶ Letter from Hepworth to Nicholson, undated 'Tues' [Possibly August 1943, as a reply from Nicholson is dated 26th August. The letter mentions a heatwave, and that a second letter will follow with instructions on what to get from the studio for the Wakefield exhibition, which took place February–March 1944], TGA 8717.1.1.277. Nicholson's response re. Howard's, if it came, is missing from the archive.

¹⁷ For more see C. Twinch, *Women on the Land: Their Story During Two World Wars*. 1st Ed. Lutterworth Press, 1990.

here. *Not only will it cost much less but it will be worth carving.*¹⁸ Depending on the exact date of carving, it is possible that the wood for *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue* came from Hepworth's existing stock of wood at the studio. She lists this to Nicholson; '1. *There's a superb bit of Yew that Serge gave me which Oakley took & put under cover for me. Please try to trace it. 2. There's the 'grey elm' from Waterloo Bridge lying about somewhere. 3. There were odd pieces perhaps in 3 Mall shed.*'¹⁹ Nicholson replies, 'I went round & looked at No. 7 shed & yard last night ... I shall have to scratch your name & address on several likely bits & get the rlwy [railway] to collect. I will enquire about the Oakley piece & all the material in No. 3 shed will be plain sailing & the logs too.'²⁰

Hepworth does not specify the wood of *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* in either her sculpture records, nor in subsequent publications. It is described in Hepworth's first monograph, written by William Gibson in 1946, as 'a larger variation of a model in plaster made just before the war', with this information attributed to the artist.²¹ Gibson goes on to note, 'it will be observed that in the adoption of colour and of these severer forms with their uniform, sharp edges and regular curves, the sculptress abandoned the use of the fine sense of material and subtle appreciation of surface which had previously contributed so much to her work. This was forced upon her by lack of wood or stone of a quality which would allow the exercise of these faculties,' offering another reason for the 'whiting' of the sculptures.²² The organic material is obscured and focus is drawn – through the title as well as the sculpture itself - on colour. The white exterior contrasts with the pale blue interior, against which run taut red and white strings.

Rather than dwelling on the possible privations which led to this, Hepworth interpreted these developments as reflecting her new experiences of the Cornish landscape. In 1951, Hepworth wrote of the works made at this time, 'the colour in the concavities plunged me into the depth of water, caves, or shadows deeper than the carved concavities themselves. The strings were the tension I felt between myself and the sea, the wind or the hills. The barbaric and magical countryside of rocky hills, fertile valleys, and dynamic coastline of West Penwith has provided me with a background and a soil which compare in strength with those of my childhood in the West Riding.'²³ Although this might be viewed as a retrospective reading of the shift, it is supported by a letter written on 4th April 1943 by Hepworth to Ramsden, 'Emotionally I've always thought of everything related to landscape – scale, tension, poise, everything for me comes from the contours & feel of the earth & the relation of man or woman in this landscape ... whenever I've made a carving – however small – it's always been born of landscape & for me brings the outside world into the palm of ones hand, or into one's room.'²⁴

¹⁸ Letter from Hepworth to Nicholson, undated 'Sat' possibly August 1943 again prior to Nicholson's response of 26th August (Thurs) TGA 8717.1.1.278

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Letter from Nicholson to Hepworth, 26th August [1943, dated by Alan Bowness, given Hepworth is preparing for her Wakefield exhibition of early 1944] TGA 20132/1/144/98

²¹ Gibson p.9

²² Ibid.

²³ *Carvings and Drawings*, section 4.

²⁴ Letter from Hepworth to Ramsden, 4 April 1943, TGA 9310.1.1.15.

Hepworth sold *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* 1943 to collector and friend Helen Sutherland (1881 - 1965) in 1944. In May 1942 Sutherland had acquired one of the plaster *Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red)* (BH117E) and visited Hepworth and Nicholson at Chy-an-Keris in early 1943, writing with thanks for their hospitality on 30th March 1943.²⁵ In a letter dated 25-26th January 1944, Sutherland writes, 'It is very exciting to hear of a new carving by Barbara – I wonder what it is ... could I hear and know a little about Barbara's carving?? I am very fond of the blue lined one – sometimes I wish had had the bigger one as I believe it is more expressive in the rather larger scale (like a bottle of wine being so far more satisfactory in quality than a ½ bottle! Particular things need a certain room and space? Have the ideal scale?) ... If there were any chance of getting the new carving (its probably 'gone' already) if it were within my means & if it captivated my soul!'²⁶ She ends the letter requesting to see a photograph.

Hepworth sent photographs of 3 sculptures completed in 1943, *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red*, *Two Figures* (BH120) and *Oval Sculpture* (BH121). Sutherland writes to thank her for these photographs on 1 March 1944, 'it is difficult to choose just from a photograph isn't it ... which do you think is the most complete the one with strings? Or the beech wood? ... the roundness of the one with strings particularly (& its ethereal colour), the Norman-Romanesque roundness & simplicity pulls me... perhaps the white and pale blue pulls me bec[ause]: I see 2 aspects of it & the colour pulls me yet it may be most beautiful to have & see the texture & natural colour of the beech wood.'²⁷ Sutherland also considers the new sculpture in relation to *Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red)* noting, 'You may think the string one a little too like the one I have? But I don't think this is so & in the big room a certain repetition or likeness with difference, with variety, is a beautiful & poetic thing – one of the things I like best to get into the room – as it were – a continuity of living pattern?'²⁸ She ends her letter with a quote from Darwin, which resonates with the development of Hepworth's sculptures in this distinct war-period, 'From so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful & most wonderful have been, & are being, evolved.'²⁹

The sculpture had arrived with Sutherland by 14th March 1944 when she wrote, 'the beautiful carving has come and is safely unpacked ... I like the scale of it immensely & the stgs which have some suggestion of eternity about them in their use – their manner of going so far on - for all that they are so palpable.'³⁰ The sculpture's revolving turntable or 'lazy susan' underneath the base was probably made at the request of Sutherland who had previously asked for one to be made for plaster *Sculpture with Colour (Deep Blue and Red)* (BH117E) 'so that it could easily be turned'.³¹ A letter over two years later reveals that Sutherland was not sure about the acquisition, under the probing of

²⁵ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 30th March 1943 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/6

²⁶ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 25-26th January 1944 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/8

²⁷ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 1 March 1944 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/9

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Quoted in *ibid*. The original quote is the last sentence in Darwin's 'The Origin of the Species' (1859)

³⁰ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 14 March 1944 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/10

³¹ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 3rd June 1942 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/4

Hepworth, 'Let me answer about your carving - it is true - I don't *think* I've ever quite made friends yet with that large oval carving? Perhaps I've never found the best place for it ... But I don't think I'd better try returning it & changing etc. ... the fact that you say you are very fond of it means that it must be a good one I am sure.'³²

In 1953 Sutherland wrote again in reference to *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red*, this time having been approached by Bryan Robertson 'telling me you are to have a great exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery next spring & saying both you & he would like to borrow some of the things I have here ... the sculpture has stood in a window & the paint has peeled & altogether it needs its dazzle & sparkle renewed – it will be a great pleasure if this can be done (of course at my expense) – I have not dared to get anyone up here to touch it without proper advice from you.'³³ The sculpture was included in the exhibition, likely restored at Hepworth's studio in early 1954. A stringing map for the work plots the placement of the red and white strings around the oval aperture. The handwriting is possibly that of Roger Leigh,³⁴ who was Hepworth's assistant between 1953-54 and again in 1957-8. It remained in Sutherland's collection until her death, when it was bequeathed to Nicolette Gray (1911 – 1997). Gray had been a long-term supporter of modern art in Britain, including organising the important exhibition *Abstract & Concrete* in 1936, which toured the UK, showing Hepworth's work alongside her peers such as Ben Nicholson, Alberto Giacometti, Piet Mondrian and many others. Hepworth cleaned the work for Gray in 1967, and it was included in Hepworth's 1968 Tate retrospective, one of the few sculptures to be reproduced in colour within the catalogue.

The plaster prototype was eventually destroyed when Hepworth had it cast in bronze at Art Bronze Foundry in 1961 to create *Sculpture with Colour and Strings* 1961 (BH113B). She requested certain adjustments to the maquette, taken from the wood carving, 'I would suggest in the casting that you might leave 1/8 inch hole where all the strings enter at the back. The present aperture is too big. In the bronze version I should take all the strings direct to the back without the cross-bar and the 1/8 inch hole would go straight through to the little flat plane at the back.'³⁵ Having remained in private collections since its creation, *Sculpture with Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue and Red* was rarely seen in public. It was sold in 2024 at auction, and an export license was requested to ship the sculpture overseas. The sculpture was deemed a national treasure and too important to leave the UK. It was placed under a temporary export bar by the UK Government to give a UK museum the chance save for the nation.

The Hepworth Wakefield, in collaboration with The Art Fund, launched a fundraising campaign in summer 2025 and there was an outpouring of support and donations from over 2,800 members of the public. Public donations were joined by several major grants and the fundraising target was met on 19 August 2025. *Sculpture with Colour (Oval*

³² Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 5th July 1946 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/11

³³ Letter from Helen Sutherland to Hepworth, dated 18th December 1953 Tate Archive TGA 20132/210/15

³⁴ I am grateful to Dr. Sophie Bowness for this suggestion that the handwriting is bears a resemblance to Leigh's handwritten memoir.

³⁵ Letter from Hepworth to Charles Gaskin at The Art Bronze Foundry, 2nd November 1961, held at The Hepworth Wakefield Archive

Form) Pale Blue and Red evolved from small maquette that Hepworth made and cherished at the outbreak of war, and then developed in response to her new surroundings. While charting an important turning point in her artistic development, particularly her integration of colour and form, the sculpture also embodies Hepworth's personal resilience and ability to persist creatively through challenging times.