Sculpting Lives podcast transcript

Series 2, Episode 3: Gertrude Hermes

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Jane Hill:	She had many, many aspects to her nature. She was quite a primal person, "Wild Girl Gert".
Madeleine Bessb...:	She knew how important she was, so she wanted to show the best.
Jo Baring:	Hello and welcome to Sculpting Lives. A podcast with me, Jo Baring...
Sarah Turner:	... And me, Sarah Turner.
Jo Baring:	This is the podcast series in which we investigate the life and work of remarkable women sculptors and in this episode, we are looking at the artist Gertrude Hermes.
Sarah Turner:	Hermes was a sculptor and a wood engraver. She's perhaps better known as a wood engraver, and she might be someone who you've not heard of. She has fallen somewhat out of the histories of sculpture, but we feel that she deserves to be much better known.
Jo Baring:	She absolutely does. And when we interview artists, you'll hear her described as a goddess to them, which is absolutely fantastic. But not only did she leave a lasting legacy for artists in terms of her wood engraving and her sculpture, she also changed the Royal Academy.
Sarah Turner:	Yeah, so we will delve into that institutional history later. She didn't leave many words behind, we don't have recordings of her. So we really do have to look at the work and really go in search of it as well. So that's what we did in this episode; visiting locations which were particularly significant to her life and her career.
Sarah Turner:	We're stood outside a rather beautiful house, right on the banks of the Thames, which was owned by her friend Naomi Mitchison.
Jo Baring:	That's right. So Naomi Mitchison owned this house in the 20s and 30s and Naomi was this really energetic, vocal campaigner for women's

rights. She was also really social, so had lots of parties in this house. People like E.M. Forster went there, Aldous Huxley, and it's really interesting to think about Gertrude as part of that. So Naomi commissioned her to make several works for the house, including seahorse, which is now perched on top of a former squash court, in what is now Latymer School, and also a snail fountain. And again, there are hints there, with the snail and the seahorse, those natural forms of animals, just thinking about themes that Gert was really drawn to.

Jo Baring: So just to retrace her biography, so Gert was born in 1901, she dies in 1983 and we spoke to her biographer, Jane Hill, and she told us a little bit about Gertrude's early life.

Sarah Turner: Jane, we want to do some scene-setting for our listeners and to introduce Gertrude Hermes' life, her biography, really. So could you take us back to the beginning and just tell us a little bit about where she was born, what kind of family she was born into?

Jane Hill: Gertrude Hermes was born into a generation that was both incredibly fortunate but also suffered two World Wars. She lived through two World Wars, but she was born in 1901 into a German family. Both her parents had been born in Germany, but she was born in Bickley, Kent. Brought up in a rather rural way. Always had a great love of nature. Her first thought was that she might become a farmer rather than an artist, but from a very early age, she was drawing. But she would go and see her family in Germany. Her aunt, Mary Rossler, who was an artist and part of the Dachau colony and a relation before that, Anthony Rappard was an artist and a friend of Van Gogh. So she had this connection to the Northern Hemisphere as well, so she was both very much an English, or British, artist, but also her compass was pointing North, always for her as well.

Jane Hill: So having decided she wasn't going to be a farmer, she then did a foundation year at Beckenham Art College. And following that she wanted to go to the Slade, so around about 1920... She had a year in Germany after Beckenham and in about 1921, she wanted to go to the Slade, but it was still at the point where returning war veterans from the First World War were being given the places and women on the whole weren't getting places at the Slade, just after the First World War. On that basis, Leon Underwood set up his own school of painting and sculpture and a number of artists who, like Hermes, Eileen Agar being one of them, who couldn't get into the Slade, joined Leon Underwood's school of painting and sculpture. It couldn't have been, I think, more perfect for somebody like Gertrude Hermes.

Sarah Turner: We're stood outside number 12 Girdlers Road in Brook Green. And this was the site of the Brook Green School of Art founded by Leon Underwood in 1919.

Jo Baring: That's right, so Leon Underwood is a really influential artist and he's considered now one of the most important figures in the development of modern sculpture in Britain. So he sets up this art school in 1919 in West London and actually, it's a testament to him that you get people like Henry Moore there, Barbara Hepworth, Eileen Agar. So you're getting a real sense of that avant-garde nature of the artists who are attending. And Gertrude is there in the early 1920s, and interestingly, I think it's really important to point out that 50% of the students at the Brook Green Art School were women and also there's a real sense of camaraderie and adventure, shared sense of adventure. They holiday together, they look at cave paintings together. They're exposed to new cultures, but also new techniques.

Sarah Turner: I think that sense of adventure is instilled in the pedagogy and the way that they're taught. There's a real emphasis on life drawing, drawing directly from the nude model in the classes, and also in discovering new forms of making art, particularly print-making. And we spoke to the Royal Academician Anne Desmet who told us more about the revival of wood engraving in the 1920s and the role that Underwood played in that and how Hermes was part of that culture.

Anne Desmet: There was rather a resurgence of wood engraving in the 1920s. When the technique was really invented or brought to a degree of finesse in the late 1700s by Thomas Bewick in Newcastle, it was very quickly a technique that was adopted for illustration. So lots of newspapers of the 1800s, they were all illustrated with wood engravings because photo mechanical reproduction didn't exist then. But they were all, it was very fine work that was trying to be photographic, but wasn't photographic, it was wood engraving. And then, obviously, it died out for the newspaper industry because photo mechanical techniques took over, but then it was taken up again by artists. So there's this surge of interest from about 1900 onwards, which continues to the present day.

Anne Desmet: But with this particular surge in the 1920s, largely sparked by an art school set up and run by a man called Leon Underwood and Gertrude Hermes went to that art school. It was in Hammersmith and he taught a range of things. He was a sculptor, in fact, and a wood engraver and you can see influences of his sculpture in hers too. But he was teaching this quite modernist approach to the technique, something very different to what you would've seen in newspaper illustrations. And this Brook Green Art School that Leon Underwood founded seems to have

been bit of a riot with lots of good parties and a good mix of male and female students, a fair number of whom ended up marrying each other and later divorcing and whatever, and having children. So it definitely sounds like a moment of the roaring 20s and she was a part of that.

Sarah Turner: What about now, because I think for a lot of people listening, Hermes is not a household name, perhaps. I'm just wondering, maybe from your perspective as a Royal Academician and an artist, maybe she's better known because of her connections to the RA and within a circle of artists. But what about her reputation and legacy now? Could you say something about that?

Anne Desmet: Well, within the RA, she is, although for myself and other print-maker Academicians, she's a goddess of print-making. I mean, she is to me. I think she's just superb. In terms of her reputation as an artist in the wider world, I think she absolutely deserves to be better known. I mean, she had a retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery and another one at the Royal Academy in her lifetime. And these days, an exhibition at the Whitechapel would secure your reputation in perpetuity, but, not so then. And she represented Britain in 1940, I think, in the Venice Biennale, as a print maker.

Anne Desmet: She had this huge exhibition at the Hepworth retrospectively a few years ago of her sculpture and prints so she absolutely deserves to be much better known, her reputation deserves to be much greater than it is, but I think she has slightly had the misfortune of… because she died in the early 1980s and I think art by women just didn't receive the recognition that it deserved at that time. So she was very well thought of but her reputation hasn't quite been pushed with time in the way it needs to be. She really does deserve to be rediscovered and put on a pedestal there with all the top artists of the last century.

Jo Baring: It's so interesting and I love the way you describe her as a goddess, a goddess of print-making. It's just fabulous. Can you just elaborate a bit more about why she is just this inspiration to you, working as a contemporary artist today?

Anne Desmet: Well, if you ask any wood engraver, really, who are their inspirations, as wood engravers, you'll get a list of names but in almost every one, every British artist will cite Gertrude Hermes somewhere along the way. She's just remained inspirational for so many artists. She also was a teacher. She taught at the Central School of Art in London and at the Royal Academy School, so she taught a lot of people wood engraving along the way. Her works are so different from anybody else's and have this huge energy and passion about them. She just clearly had a real facility to draw volume very easily, which clearly relates to her

sculpture, but with her wood engravings, there's this combination of they're beautifully drawn but there's a speed and energy and a heft and weight to them. And the marks in them are just delicious, they fizz with energy and they both describe the subject that she's engraving, but also they have this animation and life to them just as quite sculptural marks, even though they're engraved on a block that's destined to be printed.

Jo Baring: So we've heard there from Anne Desmet about just how brilliant really Gertrude was, as a wood engraver. But obviously this is a podcast about sculptors and sculpture. So Sarah, tell us really about how Gert was able to translate her work in wood engraving into three dimensions.

Sarah Turner: Well, there's a definite intimate connection between those two techniques and using tools to really carve into the material, into wood, but in sculpture as well, she was working across materials. I think perhaps now, we'd call her a multimedia artist. She didn't really always respect those boundaries between materials and forms, but we're really going to get now into her role as a sculptor and how she approached the sculptural object.

Jane Hill: I find it personally extraordinary that her sculpture was so very, very different to her wood engraving. Her wood engraving was so complex and dazzling and completely visionary and completely dreamscape, so full and her sculpture, her carving on the whole was very, very simple. Simple and she would clearly spend a long time on her carvings. She could spend a couple of years on a carving and she would make the most exquisite simple incisive mark and then that carving was ready to go. Then the carving was free after that point, because that was what she was waiting for.

Jo Baring: Can you tell us a little bit more about her connection to nature? So you mentioned that when she was younger, she wanted to be a farmer, and that connection, that symbiosis with nature is something that is a thread throughout her career, isn't it?

Jane Hill: Oh, it's everything. It's multiple threads. Multiple, multiple threads. When people describe her, people who knew her, they talk about her silence, her quiet, the way that she looked at things. And when she describes the making of the carving of 'Butterfly', for example, she would describe it as having spent two years actually looking at butterflies and thinking about butterflies. And you can imagine her as a person who would be lying on the ground, actually just surveying what's around her from all the stages, from the chrysalis stage to the opening of the butterfly, the heliotropic movement of the sunflower.

Jane Hill: All of these things utterly fascinated her and her first... So it was the animal world and the plant world, and also the cosmos, it developed into the stars, the whole, everything that we perceive. That animals, and her attention to animals and her kindness towards animals was phenomenal. I have to say, though, she also congratulated her great friend, Naomi Mitchison, on the fact that she could gut and gralloch a deer. When she would go on her annual summer holidays to Scotland, to Carradale in Kintyre with the Mitchison family, she would be salmon fishing, she'd be going out with the purse seine net fishermen at night. She had many, many aspects to her nature. She was quite a primal person, wild girl Gert and that came from Naomi Mitchison who wrote part of the introduction to her catalogue at the retrospective she had at the Whitechapel in 1967. Mitchison also called her magician or priestess and that's how her friends perceived her.

Sarah Turner: There's something that, for me, just, it's very physical. It calls to your almost internal workings and it reminds me to ask you, I know you've written about the womb imagery and that she was interested in these, the cavity spaces and externalising the internal. Can you tell us more about that interest in her work?

Jane Hill: Womb magic, I think that term was coined by Eileen Agar. Womb magic was very, very much a part of her whole work, her whole trajectory, her whole life. She was obsessed and convinced by the beauty of this. 'Baby' from 1932 was a chalk pebble carving that she... From a chalk pebble that she found on the beach at Hastings. It was very common at that time for those students and I'm sure students still actually go search out wild stones, what we might call wild stones. What is rather magnificent about this carving from from a pebble, sometimes she would carve actually directly on the beach at the time using just a pen knife. Sometimes she would just take the chalk pebble home as well, and then work on it.

Sarah Turner: We are walking down Hammersmith Terrace at the moment, the site of homes of really many artists and craftsmen. We're walking past the calligrapher's house, Edward Johnson. That's Emery Walker's house, the really...

Jo Baring: Doves Press [crosstalk 00:16:47] up the road.

Sarah Turner: ... The Doves Press. Absolutely, the arts and crafts printer. So this is a really important artistic hub by the Thames, in Hammersmith and this is where Hermes lived in the basement of number 10. But if we just have a bit of a catch up on her biography, from being an art school in the Brook Green School of Art, which was just down the road in the

other side of Central Hammersmith. So not too far away, maybe 15, 20 minutes walk.

Jo Baring: Not too far away. Yup, didn't take us long, we've just walked from there. Then, thinking about her biography, so at the Brook Green School of Art, she meets then marries someone called Blair Hughes-Stanton, who's also an artist. Then they live here in the basement of Hammersmith, number 10 Hammersmith Terrace, but obviously still now, they're flooding problems and they experienced a really bad flood and unfortunately lost quite a lot of work in that flood. Then in 1928, they moved to Suffolk. 1930, they moved to Wales. Then in 1932, she leaves Hughes-Stanton. By this stage, they've got two young children and she returns to London and it was in London, and this is when, really, her networks swirl and mobilise to support her.

Sarah Turner: Yeah, because she's got to work, she's got to support herself and her young family. She has to do that by making prints and making sculpture and she comes back to this part of West London. It obviously holds a great pull for her and to be part of this artistic community once again.

Jo Baring: That's right and just one of her next door neighbours is the politician and humorist A.P. Herbert. Interestingly, the door knocker that he had for many years, which I think was on the door just until a few years ago, was a swallow door knocker made by Gert and David Bowie actually had Gert's swallow door knocker in his art collection.

Jo Baring: She's also at this time, in 1932, designing the fountain door handles and door push for the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon alongside artists, such as Eric Kennington, John Armstrong. She's exhibiting at the Zwemmer Gallery and also joins the society of wood engravers.

Sarah Turner: And then in 1934, significantly, she exhibits for the first time at the RA Summer Exhibition, which she describes wonderfully as the widest shop window in the world.

Sarah Turner: The area of Hammersmith on the banks of the Thames was important for Hermes throughout her career. It's not only where she was living and working, but where she built up some of her most important support networks, with friends and other artists as well.

Jo Baring: That's right. She had a lot of friends there and as you say, they commissioned her to make various things. It's really important to think about her really mobilising her networks and having that support. What is fascinating is bringing these artists to life, isn't it, Sarah, and we actually tracked down someone who knew Gert and worked with her

and showed a number of her works in various exhibitions across the years. And that is the wonderful Madeleine Bessborough from the New Art Centre. So we went down to Roche Court to catch up with Madeleine and just find out a little bit more about Gertrude.

Jo Baring: So we've got this amazing file for... So Madeleine, you set up the New Art Centre in 1958?

Madeleine Bessb...: '58.

Jo Baring: Incredible.

Madeleine Bessb...: And the idea was to help young artists get established.

Jo Baring: And so we've got these files in front of us, we're having delicious coffee and biscuits and then there's these files in front of us of correspondence from Gert, old exhibition catalogues.

Madeleine Bessb...: All rather basic. It's not like people keep them press cuttings, which are important. The idea of the New Art Centre was that I didn't have any money, but we had this idea of starting a gallery to help young artists get established.

Jo Baring: So tell me about Gert. So how did she come into your [crosstalk 00:20:20]?

Madeleine Bessb...: Well, Gert came into our, swanned into, our lives through 12 Girdlers Road, which was this arts school everybody told us about that had been so influential. So when we, we then had an exhibition of wood engravings and things of [crosstalk 00:20:36]...

Jo Baring: From the Brook Green School?

Madeleine Bessb...: Yes.

Jo Baring: Oh, did you? Okay.

Madeleine Bessb...: This exhibition was called "12 Girdlers Road". Had all sorts of interesting things. We've got a big file on that. And Gert was one of the people who, from then on, which we said, would you like, because she had a lot of work.

Jo Baring: And so what was she like? So you were having tea and biscuits with her...

Madeleine Bessb...: She was quite fierce and, like all success, good artists are quite responsible for what they do and they're responsible and didn't want

to be made into a... She knew how important she was so she wanted to show the best. She always had a great sense of her own importance. Not in the... But she didn't, she wasn't humble, Gert, really, but in the nicest way.

Jo Baring: But that's good to hear.

Madeleine Bessb...: Yes. No, no, no, in the nicest way. And it's terribly good for the young not to... To realise that there are people who do realise their own value and it's not being boastful and it's not being... It's being a sense of what they are and what they've worked for.

Jo Baring: And you've got a piece by Gert now at the New Arts Centre, haven't you?

Madeleine Bessb...: Yes, it's up. It's in the garden.

Jo Baring: Yeah, so can you tell us a little bit about that?

Madeleine Bessb...: The sculpture that we've got is called 'The Seed' and it's a beautiful flower on a tall stem with leaves coming out at the bottom. And then there's this flower head, which has got a great penis coming out as one of the...

Jo Baring: Stamen?

Madeleine Bessb...: Stamen, one of the stamens and it's beautifully cast. Gert was, she was quite man-ish, in a way, in that 30s way. Very kind. She was interesting. She was held in high respect by them all. They all loved... And she was a great friend and I think she was a centre of, everybody used to go, she always had people to supper and things. So she was very much a character in her own right.

Sarah Turner: The next person we're going to hear is the artist Eileen Agar, a contemporary of Hermes and this recording is courtesy of the amazing Artists' Lives Project, which is held at the British Library. Here we can hear Agar reminiscing about her friend Hermes.

Eileen Agar: Oh, she was a charming person. I met her daughter, not the other, just the other day. And Gertrude was, everybody loved Gerts, as we all called her. She was a beautiful engraver. She gave me that little one. That's hers.

Cathy Courtney: That's lovely.

Eileen Agar: And that tiny one. And I've got others of hers also, but I haven't got them here, but there wasn't a single person who ever said anything

against her. She was awfully nice, very kind and something very serious about her [inaudible 00:24:07] she took her work very seriously. She was a beautiful wood engraver and I've got her book somewhere of plants. She did a book of plants. I don't know if you know it. Yes.

Cathy Courtney: So she was a very close friend?

Eileen Agar: Yes. She was a very, she was lovely to everybody and everybody loved her. And I remember going into the academy one day and then on top of the academy, they always put what is happening in the academy. And this said, Leonardo da Vinci, Gertrude Hermes. And I asked Gerts, I said, "Well, what you think about being closely linked with Leonardo da Vinci?" She said, "You know, I didn't notice it."

Cathy Courtney: And was she doing the same painting and drawing courses as you or was she engraving?

Eileen Agar: Yes, she was but she was more interested in wood engraving. I did one or two in wood engravings then I jabbed my fingers and I thought, this is not for me, I prefer painting, you see. But she had terrific skill. She could do curves and do whatever she liked and on a wood block.

Jo Baring: Okay. So let's go back to Gertrude actually getting her work into the world, so how she went about that. So she's a member of various different societies, isn't she and it's interesting to see where she placed her work, Sarah.

Sarah Turner: The Royal Academy was particularly important for her and she calls that the largest shop window in the world.

Jo Baring: Love that.

Sarah Turner: Yeah, I know. She, and again, it's that issue about where can the public meet your works of art and the Royal Academy, particularly the Summer Exhibitions, give her this showcase in which to place her work so that the public can see it and buy it too. She does use societies and exhibition in institutions like the RA to really network and to showcase her work to the public.

Jo Baring: Yeah, and it's something that Jane Hill explores a little bit more about.

Sarah Turner: Could you tell us more about her exhibitions and where people would've been able to have seen her work in this period?

Jane Hill: Initially, so St. George's Gallery, very early on in the early 1920s, when she was showing print and sculpture and from an early point also she started as often as she had the money to do so, she would put her

work into bronze because she started carving largely chalk pebbles or flotsam and jetsam, but chalk pebbles, which don't last forever, so she would put her work into bronze. But in 1934, she started exhibiting both with the London group and she became a member in 1935, but also at the Summer Exhibitions at the Royal Academy, both 1934. She would reserve the Royal Academy for her portrait heads, for her bronzes. Not always bronzes, sometimes it might be the plaster because it was un-commissioned and she would paint, patternate, paint and patternate the surface shellac and paint the surfaces, the heads. But the London group was reserved always for her carvings and for her wood engravings.

Sarah Turner: I find that really fascinating because you can see in that, that she's positioning herself in different spheres of the art world at that moment, that she's got one foot more towards the establishment and the academic and then there's this other foot that's much more, she's connected to artists that we would consider avant-garde and part of a more modernist movement. Although we know that those categories do intertwine, it's interesting, you can see her almost being quite canny about where she's putting different kinds of work.

Jane Hill: You've just used the word that I was going to use, canny. I think it was very canny of her. If you consider what the Summer Exhibitions at the Royal Academy are like and how closely packed the work on the walls is, I think it was very canny of her to want to put out her busts, her heads rather than to have her wood engravings in a wall amongst many, many, many others, but also it was a platform for sales. It had larger audiences and it was a canny move.

Sarah Turner: Did she have particular patrons for her work?

Jane Hill: Yes, she did. Her patrons tended to be her friends, but she was very, very well acquainted. So the Sainsbury family, for example. There are plenty of people who would've liked to have helped her and there was something that she didn't want to do as well, if she didn't want to do it. Self-promotion was not her thing, actually making the work. Of course she would've wanted to sell the work but there were certain things she was not prepared to do.

Jo Baring: There's a really, really interesting episode in Gertrude Hermes' career, which has really only just come to light through Jane Hill's book. And it's something that we spoke to Annette Wickham about, who is the Curator of Works on Paper at the Royal Academy.

Annette Wickham: When you look at the statistics about women sculptors at the Royal Academy, I was just having a quick look before we met, and they've

only been nine altogether and six of them are since 2009, so [crosstalk 00:29:40]

Jo Baring: Whoa! Stop it! Are you joking? That's worse than...

Sarah Turner: [crosstalk 00:29:45] Even to this present day?

Annette Wickham: Yeah.

Jo Baring: That's worse than I could have imagined.

Sarah Turner: That's so interesting for us because sometimes you might think that these are historic issues. There's often a discussion, why are we still talking about this? Is there a need to highlight women's histories? There's those questions, challenges come up a lot, but it's interesting. The data is still suggesting that there's a significant disparity.

Annette Wickham: Yeah. I mean, I think it's really changing over the last 10 years, I suppose. The rate has really increased, both the rate of electing women and of electing women's sculptors. But before that, it's literally a handful.

Sarah Turner: She's also really famous within the history of the RA, isn't she. Can you explain why?

Annette Wickham: Yes. So she comes in as an associate member, so that's the first stage in becoming a Royal Academician in 1963 and a few years later, she drops a nice little bombshell on the place because she goes along to the general assembly meeting, so that's the meeting of all of the Academicians and on that particular occasion, they were going to elect their new president, so that was Tom Monnington in 1966.

Annette Wickham: She goes along to the meeting, they elect the president and then they have drinks and a chat afterwards. At which point, the three women who were there were ejected and the men went on to have a nice dinner together. And this, I think just brings home to her the absurdity of some of the old traditions of the Royal Academy that was still existing at this time.

Annette Wickham: And she and Maxwell Fry, who's a friend of hers and an architect, a fairly new associate of the academy go off together to have their own dinner on the King's Road where he says dine on spaghetti and blanc and conspire about what they're going to do about this situation and the result is this great letter from Hermes, which is quite short and polite, but it also packs a punch where she just says how ridiculous this was. I can read out some of it for you.

Jo Baring: Yes, please.

Sarah Turner: Yeah.

Jo Baring: Hear what they conspired about over spaghetti and blanc.

Annette Wickham: Yes. It's the way to do it isn't it, I think. So she says, "I'm writing to record the fact that I was really distressed after the meeting on Tuesday to elect the new president. While enjoying drinks with the very pleasant company, I gathered that dinner followed, which smelled delicious, but that we three women members who were present were not permitted to partake. This is an ignominious situation, which I've never found myself in before and will not lend myself to ever again. It was humiliating and I left hurriedly." And then she goes on to say that Maxwell Fry was shocked as well and he took her out to dinner.

Annette Wickham: And then she says, "I've always known, of course, that there were certain occasions such as the banquet...", so that's the annual dinner for the Royal Academy's annual Exhibition, the Summer Exhibition. And she says "...to which women are not invited. And there are perhaps reasons for this which I do not know about. But surely, when women are asked to attend a meeting of such importance as this last one, and it's deemed necessary to feed all the lovely men, why should peanut and alcohol be considered enough for women? One of whom came all the way from Cornwall."

Annette Wickham: And then there's another interesting part of the letter where she says, "No, I am not a feminist, nor have I ever felt the need to fight for rights or anything like that. Just an artist. And as such, find it difficult to accept sex discrimination of any kind in the world of art. I'm very proud to be an associate of the Royal Academy, but if these ancient rulings continue, then I must consider my position very seriously, for it seems to me quite out of tune with the pattern of life today, when women serve with distinction in many walks of life. We have a reigning Queen and a woman who is Minister of the Arts." And then she says, "This splendored establishment, the Royal Academy of Arts, cannot afford to lag behind in these matters." So she tells it to them fairly straight.

Sarah Turner: I think the thing we found about Hermes is that she's always surprising and she's always reinventing herself later on in life. She doesn't just fade from view as well. In the 1960s, in 1967, she has a major retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery in East London and the director, Bryan Robertson holds her in really high esteem. He says in the catalogue and I'm quoting here, "Whatever may be currently decreed by fashionable promotion, the world that Gertrude Hermes

created is a vital part of British art." So I think that's where we can see her, as a vital part of British art.

Jo Baring: I know, I love that idea and also the fact that Bryan Robertson was supporting artists like David Hockney as well Normally, you wouldn't think of Gert and David Hockney in the same sentence, let alone the same gallery. Sadly though, a few years after her Whitechapel show, she had a stroke and Jane Hill tells us more about the impact that that had on her.

Jane Hill: In her late life, she had quite poor health. So it was 1969 when she had her stroke. But I think prior to that, around about the same time, it... And it was a full stroke, it was a full body stroke, which was completely disabling, though she did recover from it. But she would say that after her stroke, she carried on exhibiting, but it was all retrospective, all work that she had mainly already made, but she carried on teaching and being much loved and much appreciated by her students. So her facilities as a teacher were absolutely unchanged by her stroke, because somebody who had been quite so vigorous as Eileen Agar said, she remembers her heaving about stones and lumps of wood and how vigorous she was, it was clearly quite disabling for her, the stroke.

Sarah Turner: And that came just two years after her retrospective at the Whitechapel and it's interesting to think about Bryan Robertson writing about Gertrude Hermes in the 60s. We often associate him with quite a different kind of sculpture, but he says, whatever fashion says, she is a vital part of British art and he could obviously perceive something in her work. But it's interesting how obviously fashions change and even, by that time, in the 60s, she's been positioned as part of a different kind of tradition, but Robertson detects that vitalism in her.

Jane Hill: Absolutely. Well, he also said that he didn't think you could date her work. That it was of a type, a form of work that would be constant. He described her sculpt of The Seed as being a seminal work that was from 1962 that he thought should be in the Tate.

Sarah Turner: And what about now? What do you hope is the future of research on her, of exhibitions on her? What's left to be done, in a way?

Sarah Turner: I think there's still quite a lot of work to be done on women artists, particularly women's sculptors, where they're not the exceptions to the rule because there were plenty of them working away. They may not have had the positions on committees and boards and the things that progress their careers, but it would be good to see it as acknowledged as a more common thing, that women were working. And the fact that she always supported herself and all of her work. She, to begin with,

she worked two days a week and then one evening a week as a teacher, she taught a whole of her working life, but that was her work and she was absolutely dedicated and single minded to that part of being an artist.

Jo Baring: Thank you to our contributors for today's episode. Jane Hill, Anne Desmet, Madeleine Bessborough, Annette Wickham. And thank you to the Artist's Lives Project at the British library for the Eileen Agar archive material. If you want to see any of the artworks discussed in this episode, go to our Instagram page @SculptingLives.

Sarah Turner: Join us next time for an episode on Alison Wilding. This podcast series was written and presented by Jo Baring and Sarah Victoria Turner. It was supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, produced by Clare Lynch with research assistance from Chloe Nahum.