

**HELEN MUSPRATT
PHOTOGRAPHER**

**5 OCTOBER – 23 DECEMBER 2020
LARGE PRINT CAPTIONS**

INTRODUCTION

The pioneering photographer Helen Muspratt (1907–2001) produced some of the most extraordinary images of the 20th century. This exhibition celebrates the recent gift to the Bodleian Libraries of her photographic archive, comprising over 2,000 original prints, surviving negatives and documents. These include experimental work, using techniques such as solarisation and multiple exposure, produced during the 1930s in Swanage and in Cambridge with her partner Lettice Ramsey. The triple self-portrait illustrates both these techniques. The archive also reflects the political interests of Helen and her close circle, including documentary records of travels made in 1936 to the Soviet Union and in 1937 to observe severe unemployment in the Welsh Valleys.

In 1938 Helen opened a studio in Cornmarket, Oxford, while Lettice Ramsey remained in Cambridge. Pressures of work and family life left little time for experimentation and documentary work, but Helen became established in Oxford as a remarkable portrait photographer recording Oxford people in celebratory moments as well as some of the leading figures of the 20th century.

Critical to all her work was her preoccupation with the face – its ‘shape and angle’.

1. SWANAGE STUDIO

Helen was born in India, the daughter of a soldier in the Indian Army. The family returned to England in 1914 and settled in Swanage, in the Purbeck district on the Dorset coast, where she and her younger sister Joan attended Oldfeld School as day girls.

The itinerant life of a colonial family had involved frequent visits to photographers. The family returned several times to Constance Ellis in Guildford, who inspired Helen to study photography in London at the Regent Street Polytechnic.

She was also encouraged by a Dorset neighbour Francis (Fra) Newbery, the retired head of the Glasgow School of Art, who lived at Corfe Castle village.

In 1929, aged twenty-one, Helen set up her first shop premises in Swanage, where Newbery designed a logo and studio for her in the back yard.

Those who realize how individual a craft, and business, photography should be would take new heart could they visit Swanage! The air of that delightful little Dorset resort is bracing, but they would find more stimulating the studio of Helen Muspratt. Her work shows great versatility of ideas and technique. Her inclinations have led her to specialize in child portraiture, but equally characteristic are her portraits of men and women, some of which show quite unusual strength. Technically, her work is interesting because of her modern methods, as well as for its intrinsic quality.

Professional Photographer, London, 1930

May Hope with her violin, c. 1928

When Helen Muspratt was a student at the Regent Street Polytechnic she lodged with her aunt, the violinist May Hope, at her home in Chelsea. This very early photograph illustrates Helen's interest in the face, highlighted by a dark background.

Swanage fishermen, 1929

Helen photographed a group of fishermen in her home town of Swanage on the jetty close to her first studio.

The Last Herring Catch, 1929

Portrait of a young woman with freckles c. 1932

Busking Miner, 1930

Helen found this unemployed young Welshman busking on the jetty and invited him to be photographed in her studio.

Swanage Couple c. 1929

Paul Nash, artist, 1935

Paul Nash came to Swanage for several months and painted some of his best-known works there. She found him rather stiff and got him to relax by asking him to show her his own photographs.

2. CAMBRIDGE STUDIO

In 1932 Francis Newbery introduced Helen to Lettice Ramsey, whose husband, Frank, a brilliant young mathematician at Cambridge, had recently died. The two women decided to set up a studio in Cambridge and the firm Ramsey & Muspratt was established.

The Cambridge studio in Post Office Terrace became a hub for parties and political activity. Helen was mixing with a vibrant set of idealistic intellectuals during term time, but returned for the summer months to her Swanage studio where business was thriving.

As Lettice Ramsey described it: *Helen had the know-how and I had the connections.*

Their subjects included scientists Joseph Needham, Ernest Rutherford and J. D. Bernal, the economist John Maynard Keynes, writers C. P. Snow and Rosamond Lehmann, and men later unmasked as Cambridge Spies; Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean and Anthony Blunt.

During the Spanish Civil War Helen and Lettice were active in the 'Help for Spain' movement. Helen photographed refugee Basque children arriving at the Southampton docks and Lettice took the dual photograph of Ray Peters and Marxist poet, John Cornford, who joined the International Brigade and died in Spain on or around his twenty-first birthday.

Lettice Ramsey and her daughters, Jane and Sarah, c. 1933

Helen and Lettice were business partners and life-long friends.

Elisabeth Vellacott, artist, c. 1932

Vellacott designed the logo for the Ramsey & Muspratt letterhead, brochures and price lists.

***Face: Shape and Angle*, date and name unknown**

'Face: Shape and Angle' is a quotation from an interview that Helen gave to Grace Robertson for the TV series *Women of our Century* on BBC Television, 1988. It is also the title of Jessica Sutcliffe's book on her mother, Helen Muspratt.

C. P. Snow, writer c. 1934

Alistair Cooke, broadcaster, c. 1934

J. D. (Sage) Bernal, Crystallographer, 1934

Bernal helped Helen and her partner Lettice Ramsey with their experiments in the darkroom.

John Cornford & Ray Peters, 1934

Photograph by Lettice Ramsey

The Marxist poet John Cornford joined the International Brigade in Spain and died there on his twenty-first birthday, or the day after. A print at the National Portrait Gallery shows the image reversed.

3. EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUES

A chance viewing of one of Man Ray's solarised photographs in a photographic magazine led to experiments with this technique and others, including rayographs and multiple exposures. Solarisation involves the momentary exposure of the negative to light during the development process, giving an ambiguous effect of positive and negative with a dark outline to enhance the image.

Helen and Lettice practised the technique, mostly in portraits of their friends in Cambridge, and produced some extraordinarily effective images. Helen also experimented with her friends back in Purbeck, where there was a thriving artistic community led by Fra Newbery.

Central to the group were the Spencer Watson family. Hilda and her daughter Mary performed extraordinary mimes and dances based on Greek myths, fairy tales and biblical stories. Helen photographed them in gorgeous costumes and striking poses. Back in the darkroom she transformed the images into magical works of art using her newly adopted technique of solarisation.

One of her most famous images is a solarised portrait of the painter Eileen Agar, who came to the Swanage studio and posed with her hair flowing down over the arm of a sofa.

Tess Mayor, later Lady Rothschild, solarised portrait, 1933

Ramsey & Muspratt

Helen and Lettice had a policy of signing photographs 'Ramsey & Muspratt, Cambridge' and it is not always possible to attribute particular photographs to one or the other.

Eleanor Singer, solarised portrait, 1933

Ramsey & Muspratt

Oliver Zangwill, neuropsychologist, solarised portrait, 1934

***Young Man*, A. E. D. Stevens, solarised portrait, 1936**

Hilda & Mary Spencer Watson dancing as Jacob & Esau, 1935

Helen made a series of solarised prints of the mother and daughter performing their mime/dances in the small theatre at their home, Dunshay Manor near Swanage. It was a perfect example of creativity on all sides.

David Brynley, singer, solarised portrait, c. 1933

Brynley and his partner Norman Notley were members of The English Singers. They were part of the artistic circle in Purbeck and performed in many of the Spencer Watson productions.

Eileen Agar, surrealist painter, solarised portrait, 1935

Agar came to Swanage at the same time as Paul Nash and they worked together on surreal paintings combining local landmarks and found objects from the beach.

4. DOCUMENTARY: THE SOVIET UNION

Both Helen and Lettice visited the USSR during the 1930s. In the summer of 1936 Helen set off on a six week's trip organised by the Soviet Friendship Society. She had recently met her future husband, communist organiser Jack Dunman, who was particularly interested in agriculture. After admiring the architecture of Leningrad and Moscow, she boarded a steamboat, travelled down the Volga to Stalingrad, and visited state and cooperative farms in the Ukraine. At every opportunity she photographed the buildings, street scenes and the people.

Her photograph of young women standing with agricultural tools on a collective farm near Kiev, in which the workers loom above the camera and appear heroic and monumental, demonstrates Muspratt's ability to marry technique and intent. The photograph indicates clearly the combined purposes of the women's arms and the implements, which they carry in a way that is typical of Muspratt's understanding of line, space and form.

Val Williams, *Women Photographers: The other observers 1900 to the Present*, Virago Press, 1986

Helen was deeply impressed by what she saw. On her return she had the images made up as a filmstrip and went around the country giving lectures about the Soviet Union.

In 1937 she pursued a further adventure into documentary work with a project to photograph the mining valleys of the Rhondda. Here she produced some of her most moving images of unemployed miners picking coal against the dramatic backdrop of the South Wales hills.

Winter Palace, Leningrad, 1936

The photo shows 'The Alexander Column', the focal point of the Palace Square.

View of the Kremlin from Helen's hotel, Moscow, 1936

Large-scale work was being carried out to reconstruct the riverbank.

Red Square, Lenin's Tomb, Moscow, 1936

Captain of the steamboat, River Volga, 1936

Engineer on the steam boat, River Volga, 1936

Market sellers, Kharkov, 1936

State Farm, Rostov, 1936

Priest, Kiev, 1936

Women working on a collective farm, 1936

5. AROUND OXFORD

In late 1937 the partners acquired a second studio in Cornmarket, Oxford, and for several years operated as Ramsey & Muspratt of Oxford and Cambridge. The Swanage studio was taken over by Helen's sister Joan. Helen was now married and starting a family, and eventually the partnership was dissolved while the name and the long friendship continued. Helen ran the studio in Oxford while Lettice Ramsey remained in Cambridge. Both needed to support their families, and now ran more conventional commercial studios concentrating on portraiture.

The staff, never more than four or five, were all women and formed a tight, supportive team. Their duties included work in the darkrooms, trimming, mounting, re-touching and reception, and some also took sittings and weddings.

Sittings were not confined to the studio. Helen also packed up her lamps and cameras for home sittings, and produced carefully arranged but informal family groups in their houses or gardens.

Weddings were an important source of trade and took up many of her Saturdays. She understood the danger of the photographer getting in the way of proceedings, and worked to a strict time limit for the formal shots outside the church.

*I had a rule: four minutes and no longer.
Time yourself by the church clock.*

Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin, 1958

Winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry, 1964.

Rex Warner, novelist and translator, 1949

Woman with earring, date and name unknown

Sir Basil Blackwell, bookseller and publisher, date unknown

Naomi Mitchison, novelist, date unknown

Thomas Alfred ('Tommy') Jackson, writer and communist, 1952

Olive Gibbs, 1941

Gibbs became Lord Mayor of Oxford and chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

6. OXFORD STUDIO PORTRAITS

Most sittings took place in the Cornmarket Studio, on the second floor of a town house built in 1680 which belonged to Jesus College. The building retained many original features including a magnificent oak staircase and sloping polished oak floorboards. Customers walked down a long corridor lined with examples of Helen's work. Many of these large prints form part of the Helen Muspratt Archive, now housed in the Bodleian Library.

Helen had strong views about how to light her subjects and settle them into poses which exploited their most becoming angles. She claimed that her characteristic three-quarter face with slightly turned head was derived from studying Renaissance portraits.

I was interested in the shapes of people's faces much more than the expressions.

She used a Rolleiflex camera on a tripod and only took one reel of film, eight to twelve poses which were mounted in a small proof folder so that the customer could choose which to have enlarged.

Wedding Photographs, dates unknown

The Kitching Family, musicians, Abingdon, 1965

Lord and Lady Beveridge, 1956

Lord Beveridge was architect of the Welfare State. The couple were here being interviewed in their home by the newly set-up ABC Television.

Sir Jack Westrup, Heather Professor of music, 1959

This photograph, taken in Balliol College dining hall was commissioned by the piano company Steinway & Sons.

Our Lady's Convent School Abingdon, 1960s

Boys' dormitory and girls' basket-making class.

Old man by fire in Downs Hospital, Wantage, 1946

Helen was asked to photograph the old poorhouse outside Wantage, still then used as a home for impoverished elderly people. Soon after they were removed to a nearby stately home and she was delighted by this enlightened initiative by a group of local doctors.

Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, Oxford Playhouse, 1966

This photograph was taken by Shirley Crawley, training with Helen to become a photographer. She captured an inspired shot from behind as the couple attended a press conference while rehearsing Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* with Burton's old teacher Sir Nevill Coghill in a sensational production by the Oxford University Dramatic Society.

HM The Queen, Prince Philip and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan being entertained at Christ Church, Oxford by the Dean, Henry Chadwick and his wife, 1969

Helen Muspratt had misgivings about photographing royalty and asked her assistant, Cynthia Bradford, to take this photograph.

7. OXFORD PEOPLE

When the Oxford studio finally closed in 1977, the firm had been running for forty years and had been responsible for just under 30,000 sittings. These included weddings, passport photos, home sittings and Degree Days when new graduates queued on the stairs to be photographed in their academic gowns.

Lettice Ramsey retired the same year and the Oxford and Cambridge studios both held retrospective exhibitions of their work. They covered the walls of their studios with samples of their work saved from their studio window displays.

In the same way this selection of photographs celebrates some of the children, women and men who, dressed in their best, passed in front of Helen's lens. With children, she had some special techniques to make sure the sitting was relaxed and happy. Rather than use a tripod she would hang her camera around her neck, and often distracted her young subjects with intriguing toys kept in a box in the studio. Few of these sitters are identified by name in the archive. Do you recognize any of them? Or perhaps you have a Helen Muspratt original at home? If so we would love to hear from you, and would be glad to add your picture to our Oxford wall.

You can contact us at:
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The exhibition was curated by Jessica Sutcliffe.