

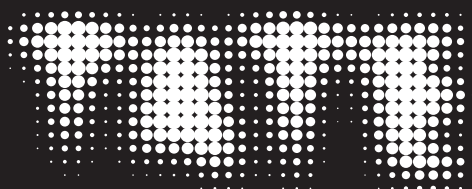
ITHELL COLQUHOUN

13 JUNE – 19 OCTOBER 2025

LARGE PRINT GUIDE



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CONCOURSE

ITHELL COLQUHOUN
13 JUN – 19 OCT 2025

In partnership with



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As the world's largest independent insurance brokerage firm, Lockton is committed to promoting greater cultural awareness and supporting all communities. That is why everyone at Lockton is delighted to support Ithell Colquhoun at Tate Britain.

This landmark exhibition explores themes of gender and sexuality, marginal identity and ecology through the works of one of the most radical artists of her generation, Ithell Colquhoun. At Lockton, we are proud of our culture and commitments to embracing diversity and celebrating

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In consultation with Dr Amy Hale, Honorary Research Fellow at Falmouth University, Professor Alyce Mahon, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Cambridge and Dr Richard Shillitoe, Independent Writer and Researcher

Discover more about Ithell Colquhoun on Bloomberg Connects



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ROOM 1

Ithell Colquhoun (1906–1988) was a visionary artist, an innovative writer and a practicing occultist. Influenced by both surrealism and spirituality, she charted her own course between the worlds of art and magic. In this way, her multi-layered artworks defy conventional creative boundaries. They propose an expanded natural and spiritual universe, and a mystic understanding of sexuality and gender.

Colquhoun was born in Shillong, India, to British parents and raised in Cheltenham, UK. Throughout her life she looked to a range of philosophies from across the world. In her work, Colquhoun reinterprets ideas from spiritual traditions such as the Jewish Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, Egyptian mythology, and Indian Tantra. She also actively engaged with modern occult societies, exploring magical practices and concepts from medieval alchemy through her art and writing.

In the 1930s and 1940s Colquhoun became an important figure in British surrealism. Her work reflects surrealism's focus on the unconscious mind, irrational subjects and the world of dreams. Colquhoun's paintings seem to conjure unseen spiritual planes, connecting surrealist methods of automatic picture-making with occult divination rituals. Drawing meaning from these chance experiments, her imagery is often suggestive of bodies and landscapes infused with sacred feminine power. From the 1940s, Colquhoun's interest in myth and magic brought her to

West Cornwall, where she gathered inspiration from ancient sacred sites and Celtic folklore.

After her death, Colquhoun's work fell into relative obscurity. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in her mystic creative output. This exhibition presents paintings and drawings from throughout Colquhoun's life, alongside recently acquired material from the artist's personal archive.

Anti-clockwise from door

Untitled [Self-Portraits created using the decalcomania technique]

Undated

Ink and wash on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89670–1

Tate Archive: TGA 8214/22
Z89945

Ithell Colquhoun (Self-portrait)

Undated

Ink and wash on paper

These self-portraits were begun using decalcomania, a surrealist technique Colquhoun used extensively from the late 1930s. The process involves applying ink or paint to a surface, then pressing another surface against it, creating mirror images. Colquhoun worked up one sheet, delineating facial features while leaving the other side undeveloped.

National Portrait Gallery, London. Given by the National Trust (Cornwall Regional Office) 1999

X88902

EARLY YEARS

Colquhoun was born in Shillong, where her father worked for the Indian Civil Service of the colonial British Raj. At a young age, she left India and was raised in Cheltenham. Despite her British upbringing she wrote of feeling an enduring connection to her birthplace. She reconciled her mystic inclinations and sense of geographical and cultural displacement through artistic expression and an interest in alternative spirituality.

Colquhoun attended Cheltenham School of Arts and Crafts from 1925–7 and studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1927–30. While Colquhoun was at the Slade, the school was at the forefront of a revival in mural and decorative painting in the aftermath of the First World War. The young artist studied in the life drawing room as well as making paintings of classical and biblical subjects.

After leaving the Slade, Colquhoun travelled in France and the Mediterranean. She showed her paintings at popular London galleries, including the Royal Academy, Whitechapel Art Gallery and the New English Art Club. Colquhoun also became interested in magical societies, which formed part of the modern Occult Revival. She made contact with alternative spiritual groups such as the Quest Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Self-Portrait

1929

Oil paint on canvas

Colquhoun painted this work while studying at the Slade School of Fine Art. It depicts the 23-year-old artist carving out her own identity, striking a confident pose in a strange landscape. She paints herself with the blunt bob hairstyle she wore throughout her student years and early career. At this time, Colquhoun's evolving creative and magical aspirations saw her exploring alternative spiritual belief systems through her membership of various occult societies

Ruth Borchard Collection, administered by Piano Nobile,
London

X67495

Judith Showing the Head of Holofernes

1929

Oil paint on canvas

In this biblical scene, Judith is shown holding the head of the Assyrian general Holofernes, whom she has killed to save her people. The painting shows Colquhoun's skill in figurative drawing and composition. It also includes mysterious elements, such as the fantastical structures in the background. Colquhoun's education at the Slade emphasised both the observation of nature and the study of historical painting. She was awarded joint first prize in the school's 1929 Summer Composition Competition for her interpretation of this subject. It was exhibited at London's Royal Academy in 1931.

UCL Art Museum. University College London [LDUCS 5281]
X88422

Judgement of Paris

1930

Oil paint on canvas

This painting reinterprets a story from Greek mythology about a contest between three goddesses (left to right: Athena, Aphrodite and Hera). They compete for the prize of a golden apple addressed 'to the fairest'. Paris, Prince of Troy, is selected to decide the contest. In the painting his figure (left) sits in shadow, his head downturned. The three goddesses appear powerful in contrast, depicted in non-naturalistic colours to reflect their otherworldly origins. Colquhoun painted **Judgement of Paris** while studying at the Slade School of Fine Art.

Brighton and Hove Museums. Purchased with V&A assistance.
X88516

Death of the Virgin

1931

Oil paint on canvas

This work is loosely based on a story of the death of the Virgin Mary at her home in Ephesus (present-day Turkey). In Colquhoun's composition, the seemingly ageless Virgin is surrounded by people in modern clothes. Framed by a decorative arch, the architecture of the room has a sense of theatricality which recurs in many of Colquhoun's paintings of this period. **Death of the Virgin** was exhibited at the New English Art Club in London in 1932.

Private collection

X89443

Aaron Meeting Moses

1932

Oil paint on canvas

In this scene from the biblical Book of Exodus, the high priest Aaron is sent into the desert by God to meet his brother Moses. Colquhoun's image of Moses (left) plays on a mistranslation of the phrase 'rays of light' in the original Hebrew text as 'horns'. This mistake led to mystical interpretations that connected Christianity with the worship of the horned Egyptian god Amun.

Aaron Meeting Moses was first shown at the **Exhibition of Mural Decorative Paintings** at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1935, alongside **Judith Showing the Head of Holofernes and Death of the Virgin**.

Private collection

X89442

Song of Songs

1933

Oil paint on canvas

Song of Songs is based on a biblical poem of the same name which describes two lovers in harmony. In Judaism, it is read during Passover. In Christianity it often represents the bond between Christ and the Church. Scholars have also suggested that the 'Song of Songs' might have been performed by ancient fertility cults in Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) and Egypt. Colquhoun's painting focuses on ideas of sexual union in the poem. It offers an early example of her interest in erotic love.

Song of Songs was included in Colquhoun's first solo exhibition, alongside **Judgement of Paris**, **Death of the Virgin** and **Aaron Meeting Moses**. It was held at Cheltenham Municipal Art Gallery in 1936.

Private Collection, Courtesy of Levy Gorvy Dayan

X88581

Head

1931

Oil paint on canvas

This painting of a woman may derive from Colquhoun's studies in the life room at the Académie Colarossi in Paris. The artist briefly attended the school in 1931. As in the Life Room at the Slade School of Fine Art, students worked directly from nude models. A 1931 ink and charcoal drawing, **Cartoon for a painting of a nude**, depicts the same model full-length with an identical pose and background.

Private collection

X88578

Untitled [Self-Portrait]

1927–30

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/2/30

Z88912

Kyria Kazou

1933

Watercolour and ink on paper

Themes of lesbian desire surface intermittently in Colquhoun's work. This portrait depicts Andromaque Kazou, a woman Colquhoun became infatuated with on a trip to Greece. In her unpublished text 'Lesbian Shore' Colquhoun describes their encounter: 'I was not conscious of myself, scarcely indeed, conscious at all. I did not try to analyse the stirrings within me ... It was not until later ... that I recognised this torrent that swirled me onwards as the "swift [river] Hebrus". I was being carried, indeed, to the "Lesbian shore".'

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89649

Humfry Gilbert Garth Payne

1935

Oil paint on canvas

Humfry Gilbert Garth Payne was a renowned archaeologist and director of the British School of Archaeology in Athens from 1929 until his death in 1936. Colquhoun met him during her travels in Greece. The research he was conducting there on the ancient city-state of Corinth influenced Colquhoun's early thinking on ancient cultures and rituals. They had a relationship between 1933 and 1935.

Lent by the National Portrait Gallery, London. Bequeathed by Mrs Arthur H. S. Megaw, 1993

X88905

Phirozsha Mehta (Phiroz Mehta)

1932

Charcoal and ink on paper

In the 1930s Colquhoun met Phiroz Mehta, a writer and philosopher who had moved to Cambridge from Colombo, Sri Lanka, in the 1920s. His overlapping studies of world religion, astrology and yoga led him to develop Theorhythm. This system of rhythmic movement and breathing exercises was designed to promote physical and spiritual health. Colquhoun's encounters with Mehta may have furthered her interest in Animism, the belief that plants, objects and natural phenomena possess interconnected spiritual essences. This is a full-scale study for a painting of Mehta made in the same year.

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X100597

ROOM 2

Clockwise from wall text

INTO SURREALISM

In the 1930s, Colquhoun engaged with surrealist groups in the UK and France. Surrealism is a transnational artistic and philosophical movement founded in Paris in 1924. Surrealist artists and writers rejected the societal norms they thought had led to the First World War, championing the irrational, the unconscious and the revolutionary.

Colquhoun encountered the work of surrealist artists first hand in 1931, when she briefly lived in Paris. She found the unconventional ideas and meticulously painted imagery of the artist Salvador Dalí particularly inspiring. In the mid-1930s she created an 'otherworldly' series of plants in a style she later referred to as 'magic realism'.

In summer 1936, Colquhoun visited the **International Surrealist Exhibition** in London, organised by the artist and critic Roland Penrose and the poet David Gascoyne. At the exhibition she attended a famous lecture that Dalí gave while wearing a heavy diving suit. Afterwards, Colquhoun began work on her **Mediterranée** series of paintings.

She considered these dreamlike images to be her first surrealist artworks.

In 1939, Colquhoun joined the Surrealist Group in England. In June of the same year, she held a joint exhibition with Penrose at The Mayor Gallery in London. However, in 1940, the leader of the British surrealists E.L.T. Mesens prohibited members from joining other societies, including occult orders. Colquhoun objected and split from the group.

Canna

1936

Oil paint on canvas

Colquhoun probably saw this canna lily, native to the Americas, at Kew Gardens, close to her studio in West London. **Canna** was shown alongside Colquhoun's large narrative paintings (displayed in Room 1) in her first solo exhibition in February 1936 at Cheltenham Municipal Art Gallery. A gallery leaflet described the painting as having 'an other-worldliness created by a very limited palette ... [where] the organic form of the plant is pushed to the picture surface'. After the exhibition Canna was bought for the Cheltenham gallery, the first of her paintings to enter a public collection.

The Cheltenham Trust and Cheltenham Borough Council
X88906

Crane-Flowers

1935

Oil paint on canvas

Crane-Flowers is one of the earliest of Colquhoun's botanical paintings. It was shown in her London exhibition **Exotic Plant Decorations** at the Fine Art Society in November 1936 alongside **Sun-Flower** (displayed nearby). By this time Colquhoun had visited the **International Surrealist Exhibition** in London. Showing her flower paintings as a separate group marked a decisive change in direction away from narrative painting towards a style she described as 'magic realism'.

COLLECTION RAW

X90250

Sun-Flower

1936

Oil paint on canvas

Frahm Collection, London

X92242

Water-Flower

1938

Oil paint on canvas

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

This sensual flower takes on bodily qualities, with fleshy petals and buds. The composition shows Colquhoun's interest in boundaries, here between the flower above the surface of the water and its roots below. In this period, the idea of an animated, spiritually infused world began to emerge in Colquhoun's practice.

Water-Flower was designed for the women's ward at Moreton-in-Marsh Hospital near Colquhoun's hometown of Cheltenham.

Arts University Plymouth

X88588

Aloe Detail

1938

Watercolour and crayon on tracing paper

Cucumber

1939

Tempera on card on panel

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89593

Jacqueline S Pruskin

X88589

Colquhoun's later plant studies become increasingly sexualised. Both **Aloe Detail** and **Cucumber** employ the surrealist 'double image' to suggest both plant forms and male genitalia. While the unfurling bud of **Aloe** suggests sexual arousal, the tip of the undulating form in **Cucumber** has been sliced off, implying impotence.

Colquhoun's earlier botanical paintings were direct observations, tinged with magic realism. Now they begin to take on uncanny and surreal qualities. Colquhoun wrote: 'The influence of Dalí's technique took root naturally ... and can also be seen (prophetically almost) in my studies of exotic plants.'

Bonsoir

1939

Collage on paper

In this collage series Colquhoun uses photographs cut from popular magazines to tell a story of same-sex attraction. Unique in her output, it was probably designed as a storyboard for a never-realised surrealist film.

Some of the images build a narrative of a couple's evening out in Paris. A woman appears to leave a man's company to engage in a sexual liaison with another woman. Other images show isolated products – lipsticks, a perfume bottle, champagne glasses – adding to an atmosphere of glamour and seduction.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/6/1
Z89522–63

THE MAYOR GALLERY EXHIBITION 1939

The Mayor Gallery was an important exhibition space for abstract and surrealist art in London. Colquhoun held a joint exhibition there in June 1939 with the artist and critic Roland Penrose. Many of the paintings in this room were displayed in that exhibition (indicated on artwork labels).

Colquhoun showed paintings from her recent exhibition **Exotic Plant Decorations** alongside her new **Méditerranée** series. Salvador Dalí's 'paranoic-critical' approach to artmaking inspired her to channel irrational states of mind, creating images of uncanny and fantastical dream worlds. In works such as *Scylla* Colquhoun employs Dalí's idea of the 'double image', in which a single object can be seen simultaneously as two different things. Some works present alternative narratives of sexual power, exploring women's liberation and the disempowerment of men.

Interior

1939

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

In this architectural fantasy Colquhoun plays with concepts of space and perspective to create an uncanny atmosphere. When it was displayed at The Mayor Gallery one reviewer noted: 'with its glass domes in deliberately false perspective, **Interior** has the vaguely sinister effect which sensitive persons often suffer in strange buildings'.

Colquhoun later wrote that all the works she displayed at The Mayor Gallery in 1939 were 'influenced by Salvador Dalí: not by particular paintings of his, but by his technical expertise and his concept of the double-image'. She categorised **Interior** as 'magic realism' while considering *Scylla* (displayed nearby) to be surrealist.

Brighton and Hove Museums. Purchased with V&A assistance.
X88582

Rivières Tièdes (méditerranée)

1939

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

Colquhoun depicts a church on the French island of Corsica as a deserted and mysterious structure. The title translates to **Tepid Rivers**, referencing a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé about fading love.

In alchemy, blue and white are associated with the feminine, representing elemental water and philosophic mercury. Red and yellow are masculine, the colours of elemental fire and philosophic sulphur. Here, coloured rivulets meet and overlap, suggesting the idea of 'alchemical union'.

Southampton City Art Gallery

X88584

Gouffres Amers (méditerranée)

1939

Oil paint on gesso panel

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

The title of this work relates to Charles Baudelaire's poem 'L'Albatros' (The Albatross, 1857). It describes a ship gliding on waves above the 'gouffres amers' (bitter abyss).

Colquhoun's interpretation of the watery scene portrays a flayed, skeletal figure which decays into a rocky terrain. Its bones are formed of coral and its genitals are a flaccid pipe sprouting a flower-like form resembling a sea anemone. While **Scylla** offers a powerful vision of the feminine form, this nightmarish scene implies masculine impotence.

The Hunterian Gallery, University of Glasgow
X88590

Scylla (méditerranée)

1938

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, 1939

Named after a sea monster from Greek mythology, **Scylla** exemplifies Colquhoun's use of the 'double image'. From one perspective, the seascape depicts two phallic vertical rocks with a boat passing between them. The composition can also be read as a woman's thighs, the clump of seaweed in the foreground forming her pubic hair.

Colquhoun recalled: 'It was suggested by what I could see of myself in a bath ... It is thus a pictorial pun or double-image in the Dalíesque sense – not the result of a dream, but of a dreamlike state.'

Purchased 1977

T02140

Untitled [Study for The Pine Family]

c.1940

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Untitled [Study for The Pine Family]

c.1940

Ink on tracing paper

Private collection

X92243

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89594

These two drawings are studies for a painting called **The Pine Family** (1940). Colquhoun merges surrealist and alchemical ideas of gender and dismemberment.

Three figures are pictured with labels in French attached to their bodies. Top: a castrated man 'Atthis' [Attis], a figure from Greek mythology who cut off his genitals and was turned into a pine tree. Bottom: a one-legged woman labelled 'She who limps'. Middle: an intersex figure described as 'The circumcised hermaphrodite'. The mutilated figures might symbolise a failure or crisis in the process of divine bodily and spiritual union. Surrealist artists often depicted dismembered bodies to represent violence and psychological trauma.

When Colquhoun submitted the finished painting to a 1942 group exhibition at the Leicester Galleries it was rejected on the grounds of 'indecenty'.

Tree Anatomy

1942

Oil paint on panel

Here Colquhoun again employs a 'double image', allowing a hollow in a tree to simultaneously represent a woman's genitals. The work is one of the earliest expressions of Colquhoun's developing ideas about feminine power and the natural world.

Tree Anatomy was shown at the Leicester Galleries, London in 1942. It replaced her painting **The Pine Family** (1940) that had been rejected on grounds of 'indecenty'.

The Jeffrey Sherwin & Family Collection. Permanently housed at The Hepworth Wakefield
X68923

WORKS IN VITRINE

Untitled [Collage with Hands]

Undated

Gouache and printed paper on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88926

Sardine and Eggs

c.1941

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88918

Untitled [Studies for The Pine Family]

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88924–5

ROOM 3

Clockwise from the door

THE MANTIC STAIN

André Breton was a poet and chief spokesperson of the surrealist movement in France. In his First Surrealist Manifesto (1924) he described 'psychic automatism': the creation of art without conscious thought.

Colquhoun's first experiments in automatism occurred just before the outbreak of the Second World War. In the summer of 1939, she visited Breton in Paris and travelled to Chemillieu, France for a gathering of international surrealists. She had been invited by the artists Roberto Matta and Gordon Onslow Ford to explore their new concept of 'psychological morphology'. They aimed to use automatic methods to interrogate mystical aspects of the human psyche and the external world. Colquhoun would test and reinterpret these ideas throughout the 1940s, in tandem with her occult practices.

Colquhoun began to use automatic, unconscious art-making techniques to explore inner landscapes and the possibility of a multi-dimensional universe. In her 1949 essay 'The Mantic Stain' she compared automatism to divination – the perception of future events or forces beyond our earthly senses. The word 'mantic' refers to the act of prophecy while 'stain' describes the images Colquhoun made through automatic methods.

Many of the paintings in this section were begun using the automatic process of decalcomania. This method involves applying ink or paint to a surface, then pressing another surface against it. The process created abstract images which Colquhoun would develop into finished compositions.

Dreaming Leaps

1945

Oil paint on paper

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

In this painting falling abstract forms appear suspended in a dream-like space. In 1945, the surrealist artist Toni del Renzio planned a volume of artistic responses to the recent suicide of 23-year-old artist Sonia Araquistain. Araquistain had jumped naked from her window in Bayswater, London. A court verdict claimed without substantial evidence that an interest in the Freudian psychoanalysis of dreams had contributed to her death. **Dreaming Leaps** is related to del Renzio's planned volume, which was ultimately abandoned. Colquhoun was married to del Renzio from 1943 to 1947.

COLLECTION RAW

X88606

Ages of Man

1944

Oil paint on wood panel

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

A sequence of translucent planes is cut through with a strand of organic matter created using decalcomania. The strand might represent plant tendrils, seed pods or even trailing intestines, as one critic noted in 1947.

Ages of Man combines philosophies and artistic approaches Colquhoun encountered at the 1939 surrealist gathering in Chemillieu, France. Some surrealist artists sought to make visible a mystical fourth-dimensional space through unconscious methods. They also explored ideas of 'sacred geometry'. The artist Roberto Matta stated: 'Painting has one foot in architecture and one foot in dream'.

Presented by the National Trust 2016, accessioned 2022

T15889

Tendrils of Sleep I

1944

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

Colquhoun uses the technique of decalcomania to evoke a dreamlike state. She later wrote that one aim of surrealist practices of 'psychomorphology' was 'an effort to tap that level of consciousness sometimes perceptible between sleeping and waking which consists of coloured organic (non-geometric) forms in a state of flux'.

The Murray Family Collection (UK and USA)

X89755

A Visitation I

1945

Oil paint on canvas

The Murray Family Collection (UK and USA)

X88596

Alcove

1946

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

Alcove II

1948

Oil paint on board

These two paintings show Colquhoun developing both sides of a decalcomania image. The earlier work was made in 1946 and exhibited at The Mayor Gallery in 1947, while the later was not completed until 1948. The 'double image' suggests both a cave and a woman's genitalia, reflecting Colquhoun's ideas of divine feminine forces in the natural landscape.

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X69354–5

Attributes of the Moon

1947

Oil paint on wood

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

Colquhoun developed the unconscious composition which began this work into a mystic figure in a flesh-like cave. She was interested in links between pagan goddess figures and the lunar cycle, as well as associations between the feminine and the moon in alchemy. Here, the figure stands on a crescent moon and has celestial orbs emanating from its head. This may echo depictions of the biblical Virgin Mary, who is often shown on a moon wearing a crown of stars. **Attributes of the Moon** looks both inward to the unconscious through automatism and outward to the spiritual forces of the cosmos.

Presented by the National Trust 2016

T15315

Guardian Angel

1947

Tempera on canvas

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

Collection Jean-Claude Vrain, Paris

X90163

Untitled [Decalcomania Counterpart for 'Gorgon']

c.1946

Oil paint on paper

Gorgon

1946

Oil paint on board

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, March 1947

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X88597

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88997

Gorgon was made using decalcomania and is shown alongside its paper 'peel'. Colquhoun pressed paper against a surface covered with blobs of paint to create two unconscious images which formed her starting point.

Colquhoun saw a winged figure in the abstract marks she had produced. She added various forms including snake-like flows around the 'head'. This symbolism recalls the monster Medusa, a mythical Gorgon with snakes for hair who can turn onlookers to stone. Colquhoun recalled: 'I meant to paint a "Guardian Angel" but the result of the automatism was so horrific that I had to call it a Gorgon instead.'

THE MAYOR GALLERY EXHIBITIONS 1947

Colquhoun held two exhibitions of her automatic works at The Mayor Gallery in 1947. In March she exhibited paintings and in December she presented drawings. Many of these works are on display nearby (indicated on artwork labels). Colquhoun created them using techniques such as decalcomania and superautomatism, in which the image is begun without conscious thought.

In 1949 Colquhoun published her essay 'The Mantic Stain'. In it, she describes working from unconscious abstract shapes. She also explains her understanding of 'psychomorphology': 'the discovery by various automatic processes of the hidden contents of the psyche ... The principle of these processes is the making of a stain by chance or "objective hazard" to use the surrealist term; the gazing at the stain in order to see what it suggests to the imagination; and finally, the developing of these suggestions in plastic [material] terms.'

Elemental

c.1946

Ink on paper

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, December 1947

Depression

c.1947

Indian ink and wash on paper

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, December 1947

Rock Pool

c.1947

Pen and black ink with black wash on paper Exhibited at
The Mayor Gallery, December 1947

Presented by the National Trust 2016
T15319

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88996

The British Museum, London. Purchased from the National
Trust, 1990
X88593

Colquhoun began these drawings using the surrealist technique of superautomatism, a method employing chance which she also called 'drawing at hazard'. She made ink sketches without conscious planning, capturing the energy of her body's movement to express lines and images from her unconscious mind. Some areas are left as she first drew them. Others are outlined or filled in with black ink, emphasising allusions to the objects and ideas described in Colquhoun's titles.

Linked Senses

1946

Ink, gouache and chalk on paper

Exhibited at The Mayor Gallery, December 1947

Linked Senses references synaesthesia, the ability to experience one sense through another, such as hearing colour or seeing music. Colquhoun related this idea to automatic processes: 'I have come to see-hear the Psycho-morphological implications in music; this too is a natural development for me'.

To begin this work Colquhoun used an automatic technique called *écrémage*. She dipped the paper into water with an oily ink sitting on the surface, producing unplanned patterns.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88992

On the Beach

1947

Powdered charcoal and watercolour on paper Exhibited at
The Mayor Gallery, December 1947

This work was begun using the automatic technique of parsemage, which was invented by Colquhoun. It involves submerging paper in water sprinkled with powdered charcoal or chalk. Here, Colquhoun outlines and overpaints the chance forms that emerge.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89598

Autumnal Equinox

1949

Oil paint on canvas

Colquhoun began this work by making rubbings against her wooden studio door. She found that 'a huge figure seemed to walk straight out of the door and advance towards me'.

Colquhoun then made the circular forms using decalcomania (see display case nearby).

The emergence of a woman's body from these automatic processes reflects Colquhoun's overlapping interests in the natural, the feminine and the divine. The title references an important moment in many spiritual traditions. At the equinox, night (associated with the moon and the feminine) and day (the sun, masculine) are of equal length and therefore unified.

COLLECTION RAW

X88608

Toy

1947

Watercolour and gouache on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88993

Leave Uncombed your Darling Hair

c.1953

Ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88994

Dervish

c.1952

Ink on paper

Presented by the National Trust 2016

T15320

Automatism: Letting a Line go for a Walk

c.1969

Ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88995

WORKS IN VITRINES

VITRINE 1 (PAIRED)

Untitled [Interpreted fumage drawing]

Undated

Gouache and smoke residue on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/13

Z89599

Untitled [Examples of the fumage technique]

Undated

Smoke residue on paper

Colquhoun used automatic methods and acts of chance to engage with unseen forces. The monochrome works displayed here were made using fumage, which involves freely moving the paper's surface over an open flame to leave traces of soot.

Tate Archive

Z89750–2

VITRINE 2 (PAIRED)

Untitled [Examples of the stillomancy technique]

Undated

Watercolour on paper

Displayed here are some of Colquhoun's surrealist experiments with automatic processes, where art is made intuitively without conscious thought. These colourful works were made using stillomancy, where ink or paint is applied onto a surface which is folded to create chance mirror images.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89673, Z89676

Untitled [Example of the parsemage technique]

Undated

Powdered charcoal on paper

This work was made using parsemage. In this method a sheet is submerged in water with powdered charcoal or chalk sprinkled on the surface. For Colquhoun, these processes offered intuitive access to the unconscious mind.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89597

VITRINE 3 (FREESTANDING)

Untitled [Automatic Experiments relating to Autumnal Equinox]

c.1949

Oil paint on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 771
Z89653, Z89655-6

ROOM 4

Clockwise from wall text

MAGICAL WORKINGS I

Colquhoun was influenced by the Occult Revival, a cultural movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries informed by spiritualism, science and colonialism. Members of magical groups combined ancient knowledge, religious practices and scientific ideas in pursuit of spiritual transformation. Colquhoun engaged with the Theosophical Society, which claimed that all faiths are connected by a core spiritual truth. She also followed the teachings and rituals of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, embracing medieval alchemy, the Jewish Kabbalah, Christian mysticism, ancient Egyptian religions, and Tantric doctrines in Hinduism and Buddhism.

Colquhoun's 'magical workings' are illustrations and diagrams that creatively reinterpret these ideas. Her drawings of 'alchemical figures' explore the concept of 'alchemical union', the joining of masculine and feminine sexual energies. This process is thought to produce the Divine Androgyne, a perfect being that transcends gender. Colquhoun also explores same-sex desire and women's sensual pleasure as paths to achieving enlightenment. In her series *Diagrams of Love* (c.1940–42) the artist illustrates ideas of sacred sexual union, or 'sex magic'. Other drawings reference the Tree of Life,

a symbol from Jewish mysticism representing hidden connections between human life, nature and the spirit world. practices.

Colquhoun began to use automatic, unconscious art-making techniques to explore inner landscapes and the possibility of a multi-dimensional universe. In her 1949 essay 'The Mantic Stain' she compared automatism to divination – the perception of future events or forces beyond our earthly senses. The word 'mantic' refers to the act of prophecy while 'stain' describes the images Colquhoun made through automatic methods.

Many of the paintings in this section were begun using the automatic process of decalcomania. This method involves applying ink or paint to a surface, then pressing another surface against it. The process created abstract images which Colquhoun would develop into finished compositions.

Alchemical Figure: Androgyne

1941

Watercolour, ink and crayon on paper

This work explores symbolic and figurative representations from alchemy, a branch of natural philosophy that was practised across the ancient and medieval world. Alchemists sought to purify base metals into gold or silver. They also created elixirs thought to prolong life and cure disease.

Christian mystics and other groups proposed spiritual interpretations of alchemy as a process of achieving divine wholeness through the union of spirit and matter. They also related this process to the joining of masculine and feminine essences, referred to as the 'conjunction of opposites'. The product of this union is the Divine Androgyne, also referred to as the Philosopher's Stone or Great Work.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/10/6
Z89574

Untitled [Drawing of a green figure and a pink figure]

c.1940

Gouache and graphite on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/7
Z89575

Untitled [Drawing of a blue and pink couple embracing]

1940–1

Watercolour on paper

Here Colquhoun incorporates same-sex desire into occult understandings of sacred sexual union. Depictions of this process typically involve the combination of masculine and feminine sexual energies manifested in the bodies of men and women. Colquhoun depicts two figures in contrasting colours, consistent with the 'conjunction of opposites', yet these opposing energies are both represented by women's bodies.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88982

**Untitled [Drawing of a blue and pink couple entwined,
annotated 'The Stone that is not a stone']**

1940–2

Ink and watercolour on paper

This drawing has a diagram-like quality, recalling how spiritual philosophies and scientific theories overlapped during the Occult Revival. The hexagonal shape made by the couple and the translucency of their bodies suggests that Colquhoun took inspiration from the mathematician Charles Hinton's drawings of tesseracts in his book **The Fourth Dimension** (1884).

Colquhoun derived her coloured coding of masculine and feminine energies from the Golden Dawn and the King Scale of the Tree of Life from Jewish mysticism. In this system, blue is the masculine sphere of Chokmah and pink the feminine sphere of Binah.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88981

Zephyr and Aurora

c.1941

Watercolour on paper

In **Zephyr and Aurora** the 'conjunction of opposites' is explored through alchemical apparatus rather than human figures. Here Colquhoun is perhaps drawing on André Breton's text **Les Vases communicants** (Communicating Vessels, 1932) in which fluids in two joined vessels achieve equilibrium. For Breton, this process represented the relationship between dreaming and waking states. Colquhoun adapts the idea to explore an alchemical understanding of gender, with the blue masculine retort hovering above the pink feminine flask. The same vessels also appear in the interior cavity of **Second Adam** (displayed nearby).

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/19
Z89688

Second Adam

c.1942

Watercolour and graphite on paper

This figure stands in a variant of the Yoga tree pose (Vrikshasana). They appear to have the genitals of both a man and a woman. In some mystical Christian traditions, the 'First Adam' was a spiritual entity, while the 'Second Adam' was the physical being described in the Book of Genesis. Others suggest the 'First Adam' was originally genderless, and that Christ was the 'Second Adam' whose 'second coming' would 'unify the sexes'.

Second Adam may reflect Colquhoun's growing interest in alternate planes of existence. The architect and mystic Claude Bragdon proposed a fourth dimension from which both the internal structures of the body and its spiritual aura would be visible.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/8
Z88986

Untitled [Sketch of a multi-coloured figure with spinal cord showing]

1938–41

Gouache and graphite on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/9

Z89576

The Thirteen Streams of Magnificent Oil

1940

Watercolour and graphite on tracing pape

In Jewish mysticism, the 'Supreme Being' has a beard separated into thirteen strands from which flow streams of divine oil that illuminate the earthly world. Colquhoun explored how this enchanted substance might enter humans through openings; twelve in twelve in men's bodies and thirteen in women's. This suggested to her that women were 'more highly evolved'.

Colquhoun referred to a key Theosophical text, Madame Blavatsky's **The Secret Doctrine** (1888), and the connection it made between the streams of oil and the Tree of Life from Jewish mysticism. The numbers next to the openings connect them with the Tree's 10 'sephiroth', or energy points.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/15
Z89573

Untitled [Figure]

Undated

Ink and gouache on paper

For Colquhoun, exploring Hindu and Buddhist Tantra furthered her understanding of non-duality – the questioning of boundaries which appear to make up reality. This idea was also common to her alchemical, animist and Kabbalistic studies. Her interpretation of yogic practices fused with ideas of alchemical union and divine feminine power. She believed that Tantric yoga could allow organic forces to merge with the body through the channelling of solar energy, turning 'the human being almost into a plant, ... "the thousand-petalled lotus"'.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89007

Untitled [Drawing of a red and yellow couple conjoined]

c.1942

Watercolour and ink on tracing paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/11

Z76002

DIAGRAMS OF LOVE

Colquhoun worked on the poems and artworks which make up her **Diagrams of Love** series between 1940 and 1942. Some are small-scale watercolours of natural phenomena and plant forms. Others consider the alchemical concept of the Divine Androgyne through the union of feminine and masculine energies. **Heart of Corn** is concerned with themes of sacrifice and rebirth, while **The Bird or the Egg** depicts healing and regeneration. **The Tree of Veins** draws on the Tree of Life from Jewish mysticism to symbolise interconnections between humanity and the divine. Colquhoun made the drawings primarily for her personal use. **Only The Bird or the Egg and Heart of Corn** were exhibited during her lifetime.

Every day
More deeply yet
Without the senses
Used for love
I grow to know you
In ways unknown

The plaited water
Of the midstream
Flows between us
Links and divides
Purple and red
Blood in circulation

The right eyelid
Is a sacred spot
Calf of the left leg
Should be bare
Wrists arms
Thighs groins
All were marked
With the same sign

There is a hollow
In your ribs
Where I lie

There is a hollow
In my ribs
Where you lock

Nothing can change this
But you may choose
An ill-fitting chest
If you will

Every voyage to the realms of fire
Adds a flame to the wand
To the worlds of water each journey
A drop to the cup

Breast to magnetic breast
We drawn near in the odour of twilight
Laying the path we tread
Step by stone

I would be a
Sea-anemone
Flower of tendrils
Opening into the
Current of love

Bells on a branch
Bright red buds
Drops on a wand, a whip

Under the sign of fire
I offer you red leaves
From the eucalyptus, the sound
Of trumpets, warmth, love

Diagrams of Love: The Comet

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Diagrams of Love: The New Fruits

c.1940

Watercolour and ink on paper

Diagrams of Love

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Diagrams of Love: Heart of Corn

c.1940–1

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/1
Z89683

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/4
Z89686, Z89684

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/2
Z89748

Diagrams of Love: Marriage of Eyes

1940–2
Pastel and ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z88934

Diagrams of Love: The Concealed Mout

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/3
Z89685

Diagrams of Love: The Heart's Directions

1940

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/5
Z88929

Diagrams of Love: The Bird or the Egg

c.1941

Watercolour on paper

Here, the 'conjunction of opposites' is represented by the alchemical symbols of the Bird of Hermes and the egg, connected by ideas of regeneration and rebirth. Together these elements form a divine figure. Its base resembles a cup, which likely references the Holy Grail from the legend of King Arthur. Supposedly offering healing or rejuvenating powers, grails also symbolise fertility in some alternative belief systems. Here, it doubles as a vulva in union with a penis.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/2
Z88980

Diagrams of Love: The Heart of Corn

1941

Watercolour on paper

This watercolour blends references to Christianity and paganism. Wheat stems – perhaps representing Holy Communion or pagan corn maidens, symbolic of fertility – emanate from a crucified figure. Many of Colquhoun's **Diagrams of Love** are concerned with themes of sacrifice and rebirth. The artist claimed that at the age of ten she saw a vision of a 'red-hearted Jesus with the blue-cloaked Mary [making] a god with breasts'. She would later read the work of the Christian mystic Jacob Böhme, who explored similar ideas.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/10
Z88933

Diagrams of Love: The Tree of Veins I

c.1941

Watercolour and gouache on paper

Diagrams of Love: The Tree of Veins II

c.1941

Watercolour and gouache on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/2

Z88936

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/8

Z88935

In Colquhoun's work, hearts represent love as a central force that unites all. Here, smaller hearts are linked to a larger one using yellow lines. Each heart ends a branch of a structure resembling both a tree and a network of blood vessels. The compositions draw on the Tree of Life from Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) symbolising interconnections between the divine and the human. They also relate to the alchemical tree of philosophers and the twelve-fold process of creating the Philosopher's Stone. Colquhoun likely based these drawings on an illustration in a 1682 edition of Jacob Böhme's book **On the Testaments of Christ**.

Diagrams of Love: Christian Marriage I

c.1942

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Diagrams of Love: Christian Marriage II

c.1942

Watercolour and graphite on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/9

Z88930, Z89749

This torso representing the Divine Androgyne is marked by three crosses formed of lips and eyes. The title reflects the cross motifs and the alchemical philosophy of Hieros Gamos or hierogamy – the sacred marriage of the symbolic Sun King and Lunar Queen to achieve divine sexual union. In alchemy, hierogamy is related to the fusion of sulphur and mercury. Hieros Gamos is also discussed in the writings of Christian mystics. During the Occult Revival it was mentioned in Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers's **The Kabbalah Unveiled** (1887) and Edward Garstin's **The Secret Fire: An Alchemical History** (1932), both of which were influential to Colquhoun. Costume design for the ballet **Miracle in the Gorbals**.

Diagrams of Love: The Androgyne I

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Diagrams of Love: The Androgyne II

c.1940

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88927

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/17/1

Z88928

These drawings extend Colquhoun's exploration of the genderless 'Androgyne'. Here, she focuses on colours and symbols while retaining a body-like form as a central column. Erotic body parts and points of penetration are highlighted, and the transmission or flow of energy is suggested.

In **Androgyne II** these forms are surrounded by a bristling force field. The presence of this exterior field recalls the prominent Theosophical concept of spiritual aura, a kind of cosmic energy surrounding bodies. Aura was thought to reflect inner states of being and provide insight of other dimensional planes.

Diagrams of Love: King and Centre

1941

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/11/6

Z89687

ROOM 5

Anti-clockwise from door

EARTH ENERGIES

Colquhoun believed in an interdependent universe of divine energy, perceiving connections between animal, vegetable and mineral worlds. She wrote about the landscape as a living being, inscribed with traces of sacred rituals and ancient spiritual traditions.

From the 1940s, Colquhoun divided her time between London and Cornwall. She rented a studio in Lamorna in 1949 before moving permanently in 1959 to a cottage in the nearby village of Paul. In rural Cornwall she was able to ground her mystical ideas in a specific place.

In her book **The Living Stones** (1957) the artist explores the Cornish region's Celtic monuments and folk traditions. Colquhoun cared deeply about the environment, fearing that the sensitive equilibrium between mythic history and the earth was increasingly under threat. She joined various Celtic societies, including the Order of Druids, the Golden Section Order and the Ancient Celtic Church.

Here, Colquhoun's visionary interpretations of neolithic monuments are shown alongside depictions of plant growth and eruptive forces. These reflect her interest in natural cycles of energy as elements of the universe's wider spiritual system.

Dance of the Nine Opals

1942

Oil paint on canvas

This painting is inspired by the Merry Maidens stone circle near Lamorna, though its nineteen standing stones are reduced to nine. The women inside the stones that Colquhoun depicted in **Dance of the Nine Maidens** (displayed nearby) transform into cores of swirling energy that connect to channels radiating from the earth. In the background are two tall stones located near the Merry Maidens, known as The Pipers. Other references include maypoles used in Celtic solar festivals; the nine planets of astrology; the Tree of Life; and the opal as a symbol linking animal, vegetable and mineral worlds.

The Jeffrey Sherwin & Family Collection. Permanently housed
at The Hepworth Wakefield
X88610

The Sunset Birth

c.1942

Oil paint on canvas

This work recalls the forms of Mên-an-Tol, a group of standing stones in the moors of West Cornwall. For several centuries the site has been associated with healing and fertility rituals. Crawling through the hole in the central stone is said to aid fertility, which Colquhoun illustrates with the outline of a horizontal figure.

Considering Colquhoun's fascination with Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, the lines and meeting points of this figure might be interpreted as nadis (energy channels in the body) and **chakras** (energy centres).

Collection Paul Conran

X88609

La Cathédrale Engloutie

1950

Oil paint on canvas

Colquhoun was also fascinated by Celtic histories beyond West Cornwall, travelling to Ireland and Brittany, France. This painting was inspired by the islet of Er Lannic in Brittany, which features two neolithic stone circles. One is underwater and the other, is partially submerged at high tide. This reflects Colquhoun's enduring fascination with tidal patterns and the fluid boundary between land and sea. The islet itself resembles a woman's knee, signalling Colquhoun's continued use of the 'double image' and the symbolic insertion of the body into nature.

COLLECTION RAW

X88612

Landscape with Antiquities (Lamorna)

1950

Oil paint on canvas

This work offers an aerial view of the neolithic monuments and ancient crosses Colquhoun passed on her walking route from St Buryan Church to her studio in Lamorna. The Merry Maidens stone circle is shown, with Nun Careg cross below it.

To the right of the bend in the road are The Pipers, two standing stones. At the bottom of the image rectangular shapes represent Vow Cave, Colquhoun's studio.

To Colquhoun, living among these ancient sacred structures granted access to different psychic histories embedded in the Cornish landscape. The circles of energy radiating from these sites anticipate the concept of 'ley lines' popularised by the 1970s Earth Mysteries movement.

Presented by the National Trust 2019

T15310

Stalactite

1962

Oil paint on board

This painting is probably based on the stone arch at Nanjizal, West Cornwall, known as the 'Song of the Sea'. In Colquhoun's composition it becomes a vulva-like cave, with a clitoral island beyond and a phallic form within (the 'stalactite', which grows from the floor like a stalagmite). The painting presents a sexualised natural world.

The flooded cave with its rocky outcrops and reflections signals Colquhoun's interest in tidal zones as spaces of transition and transformation, or even gateways between worlds.

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X68479

Mausoleum

c.1944

Pen, black ink and watercolour with bodycolour on paper

A skeletal figure is encased in a phallic structure, perhaps the burial chamber mentioned in the title. Reflecting Colquhoun's occult reading of the cosmos, the figure forms a bridge from below the ground (the domain of the dead) to the Earth's surface (domain of the living) and the sky (domain of the spirit). It seems both ancient and futuristic, perhaps reflecting Colquhoun's belief that ancient cultures possessed knowledge of advanced spiritual technologies.

The British Museum, London. Purchased from the National Trust, 1990

X34796

St. Elmo

1947

Ink and gouache on paper

Santa Warna's Wishing Well

1947

Ink and gouache on paper

Bradford District Museums and Galleries CBMDC

X89437

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89002

In these works, and in **Linked Islands I** and **II** (displayed nearby), Colquhoun morphs shapes made by decalcomania into mystic landscapes. She used the automatic mark-making process as a magical means of connecting to unseen forces in the natural world. Collectively titled **Santa Warna**, the works reference St Warna's Well on St Agnes in the Isles of Scilly. Colquhoun also wrote a poem about St Warna, the patron saint of shipwrecks. Here a tentacled being – perhaps St Warna herself – emerges from her well, embodying a living, female landscape.

Linked Islands I

1947

Watercolour and ink on paper

Linked Islands II

1947

Ink and gouache on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89003

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X31667

Earth Process

c.1940

Gouache and graphite on paper

Earth Process belongs to a group of works Colquhoun made in the early 1940s concerned with organic processes. Themes of cyclical renewal are depicted by erupting circular sequences of plant growth, atmospheric phenomena and volcanic activity. They represent an evolution from Colquhoun's early paintings of individual plants towards an interest in the wider rhythms of nature. In 1942 Colquhoun described **Earth Process** as 'a record without further elaboration of an image from a half-conscious experience ... The interdependence of the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms of the earth and their vitalisation by the sun.'

Presented by the National Trust 2016

T15316

Three Elements

c.1940

Gouache and graphite on paper

Presented by the National Trust 2016

T15318

Volcanic Landscape

c.1941

Gouache and graphite on paper

Volcanic Landscape and **Earth Process** (displayed nearby) were first exhibited in the group exhibition **New Movements in Art**. Held in 1942, the show toured from the London Museum at Lancaster House to Leicester Museum and Art Gallery before travelling to Manchester City Art Gallery. **New Movements in Art** included the work of many leading abstract and surrealist artists, representing an important moment in demonstrating the vitality of experimental and avant-garde art in Britain during the Second World War.

Presented by the National Trust 2016

T15317

Untitled [Eruption]

c.1947

Watercolour and ink on paper

Untitled [Surfacing Force]

1947

Watercolour and ink on paper

Foam Flower

1947

Watercolour and ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89689, Z89000–1

These watercolours reflect Colquhoun's fascination with violent forces in the natural landscape. She described these subjects as 'convulsive landscapes'. The term derives from André Breton's idea of 'convulsive beauty', which captures the blend of attraction and repulsion that many surrealist artists sought to achieve in their work. Colquhoun published an essay titled 'The Volcano' in the surrealist journal **London Bulletin** in 1939. She describes volcanoes as 'seething underground cauldrons that threaten to break through at any moment'.

Left to right, top to bottom

Goose of Hermogenes: It is called the Bed of Empedocles

Goose of Hermogenes: The traditional Shakti Group

**Goose of Hermogenes: Their link was without passion,
a vegetative growth**

**Goose of Hermogenes: They could look down upon the
tranquil waters of a lake**

Goose of Hermogenes: She calls to the king of the fishes

c.1955

Watercolour and ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z88990, Z88987–8, Z88989, Z88991

These illustrations relate to scenes from Colquhoun's book **Goose of Hermogenes** (1961). They tell the story of a woman who travels to a chain of fictional islands. She passes through different stages of alchemical transformation in a search for sexual and spiritual enlightenment.

According to medieval alchemists, the Goose of Hermogenes was another name for the Philosopher's Stone, a mythic substance used to convert base metals into gold or silver. The stone also represents a divine state of spiritual awakening.

One illustration depicts Empedocles, a volatile volcano at the centre of an island visited by the novel's heroine. Another references Shakti, a feminine force from Hindu philosophy that infuses the spiritual and earthly worlds.

Volcano

1972

Oil paint on paper on board

In occult spiritual traditions, a triangle with the point facing down signifies femininity and intuition. An upwards facing form denotes masculinity and spiritual aspiration. Colquhoun fuses these symbolic states in this image of a volcano. The geological processes depicted here – the conversion of solid rock into fluid magma and water into steam – emphasises the earth's capacity for transformation in a way that resonates with the principles of alchemy.

Denise and Richard Shillitoe

X88614

CENTRAL WALL

Untitled [Dance of the Nine Maidens]

1940

Watercolour and ink on papers

These drawings are some of the earliest Colquhoun made in response to the Cornish landscape. She based them on a Cornish legend in which a group of women are turned to stone as punishment for dancing on the Sabbath. As well as the Merry Maidens near Lamorna there are numerous neolithic stone circles in Cornwall, including Boscawen-un, Tregeseal and Boskednan. Colquhoun visited many such sites.

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89587–92

ROOM 6

Clockwise from doorway

MAGICAL WORKINGS II

From the 1940s to the 1970s, Colquhoun explored the concept of the 'tesseract', a four-dimensional cube. The artist believed that this theoretical shape could provide access to alternative planes of experience. Colquhoun's studies led to the expression of divine energies through diagrams, colours and abstract shapes.

In her later career, Colquhoun adapted her automatic practices using new materials. From the mid 1960s, she used an unconscious process of dripping enamel paint to make landscape paintings. Many of these later works depict erupting volcanoes, which in alchemy symbolise a state of magical transformation. In the late 1970s, Colquhoun used the same dripped enamel technique for her visionary tarot deck. This abstract spiritual aid exemplifies Colquhoun's fusion of artistic and magical practices.

In 1988, Ithell Colquhoun died of heart failure at the Menwinnion Country House Hotel, Lamorna. She was 81. She bequeathed the contents of her studio to the National Trust and her occult works to Tate.

In 2019, most of Colquhoun's works and archive materials were transferred from the National Trust to Tate, bringing together the world's largest collection of the mystic artist, writer and occultist.

Untitled [Sketch of a figure in a coloured cube]

c.1941

Watercolour on paper

Untitled [Sketch of a flattened tesseract]

Undated

Watercolour on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/18/24
Z89577

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89580

Untitled [Drawing of a figure with a flattened tesseract]

1940

Watercolour and metallic paint on paper

Colquhoun made many drawings attempting to visualise the concept of the tesseract. This four-dimensional cube was first theorised in 1888 by the mathematician Charles Howard Hinton. For Colquhoun, the idea suggested the possibility of other dimensions beyond sensory perception. Her tesseracts are often flattened into two dimensions, their overlapping planes illustrated in colour. Some drawings relate the tesseract to the human body, perhaps suggesting transcendental states.

Tate Archive: TGA 929/4/18/30

Z89579

Untitled [Sketch of a Cubic Calvary Cross (20 squares)]

Undated

Gouache and graphite on paper

Untitled [Sketch showing The Ten Divisions of the Body of God]

Undated

Gouache and graphite on paper

Tate Archive: TGA201913

Z89409, Z89405

Horus

c.1957

Ink and wash on paper

Tate Archive: TGA201913
Z89403

Towards the Tesseract

1978

Watercolour and ink on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913
Z89578

THE TARO

In 1977, Colquhoun produced designs for a set of tarot cards. Tarot decks date back to mid-fifteenth century Europe and are typically used for fortune telling and playing certain games. They usually include 78 pictorial cards divided into the Major Arcana (trump cards) and Minor Arcana (four suits). Some occultists mistakenly thought that the tarot emerged from ancient Egypt. Colquhoun rejected the common spelling, believing 'Taro' was a truer reflection of these supposed origins.

Colquhoun's deck is unique, featuring no pictured figures or symbols. Instead, the artist used dripped enamel paint to create abstract compositions. Rather than providing direct instruction, Colquhoun designed her deck as a meditative tool and spiritual aid. Her cards combine the spontaneity of surrealist automatism with the Golden Dawn's interpretation of colour theories from Jewish mysticism.

The full deck was exhibited at the Newlyn Art Gallery in 1977. In her 1978 essay 'Taro as Colour', Colquhoun recalled: 'After I had completed the pack, I saw some slides showing nebulae in outer space and the birth of stars. These recalled my designs and confirmed my conviction of their cosmographic function'.

Taro: Major Arcana

Taro: Wands

Taro: Cups

Taro: Disks

Taro: Swords

1977

Enamel paint on paper

Tate Archive: TGA 201913

Z89567, Z89570–1, Z89569, Z89568

CENTRAL WALL

Volcano Flare

1978

Enamel paint on paper

In this later study of a volcano, Colquhoun's depictions of 'convulsive landscapes' appear more abstract and universal. This blooming flare might express nature's capacity for abrupt and seismic change.

Colquhoun dripped enamel paint onto paper to conjure a sense of eruption. This artistic practice also had magical associations. Colquhoun deemed enamel paint particularly suitable for achieving the pure tones of symbolic colour associated with the Golden Dawn's interpretation of the Tree of Life from Jewish mysticism.

Tate Archive: TGA201913
Z89400

Woodland Lake

1977

Enamel paint on paper

Tate Archive: TGA201913
Z89402

Sunlight on Rock-Pool

1978

Enamel paint on paper

Tate Archive: TGA201913
Z89401

Flowering Tree in a Storm

1978

Enamel paint on paper

Tate Archive: TGA201913
Z89399

ITHELL COLQUHOUN
13 JUN – 19 OCT 2025

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Ithell Colquhoun **Alcove** 1946

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Scan this QR code to hear more stories about Ithell Colquhoun

From experts, artists and special guests:

Emma Chambers, Amy Hale, Bharti Kher, Stewart Lee, Lally Macbeth, Katy Norris, Gwenno Saunders, Matthew Shaw and Richard Shillitoe. This Story Player includes an original soundtrack written and performed by Gwenno.

Visit **Play Studio: Dream Worlds** for families' making activities. Friday–Sunday during term-time and every day during school holidays, 10.00–17.00. From Saturday 5 July

Late at Tate Britain: Ithell Colquhoun and Edward Burra
Friday 5 September
18.00–22.00

Late at Tate Britain: Folklore
Friday 7 November
18.00–22.00

