

Composition By Margaret Marks (undated)

Overview

Composition, 9 ceramic tiles

In 1934, Marks' pottery factory in Germany was closed down as Marks was a Jew and it was forbidden by Nazi law for Jews to run factories; even though it was employing hundreds of workers and successfully selling pottery across Germany and exporting to England and the USA.

In 1936 Marks and her sons fled Germany and arrived in England, eventually finding refuge in Stoke-on-Trent. It was here that Marks was introduced to the Stoke pottery industry and later ran one of their independent studios.

However, even though she had many successful commissions with them, their association ended as her Bauhaus inspired work was deemed too uncommercial for their traditional tastes.

Marks completed freelance work for other potteries whilst working on her own designs and teaching. 'Composition' is an example of her own, Bauhaus inspired, design work on ceramic tiles.

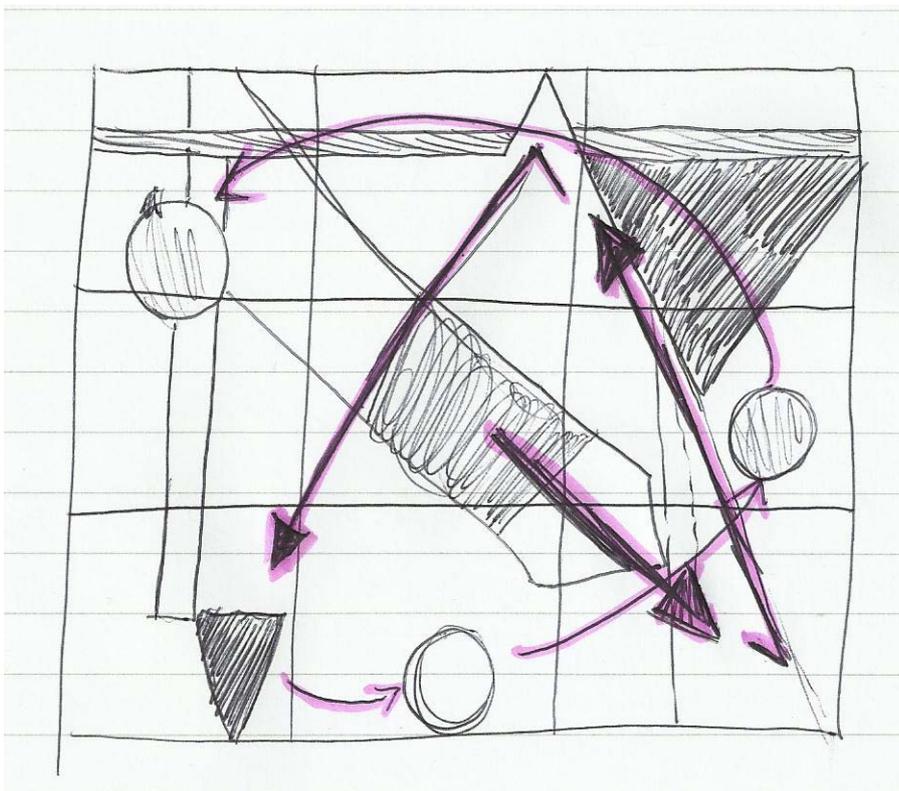
Looking closely

Form and Composition

'Composition' shows geometric shapes accentuated with brightly coloured glazes, in contrast to the muted brown background.

Visible lines and markings show the design process in its most simplistic form and suggest the mapping out of areas intended for more colour.

The eye is drawn to the central arrow-like shape in yellow and green, and then pointed towards the bottom right-hand corner where it is swept back up with the path of the white trailing contour. The viewer naturally follows the lines of the various triangular forms and then the softer ones of the circles – taking a full trajectory of the tiles.



Materials and techniques

Ceramic tiles are made entirely of natural materials from the clay's beginnings from the earth to their final firing and glaze. Tiles are manufactured using machinery to press them into shape, dry out any residue and water. They are then fired in a kiln.

Before firing, tiles can be decorated with coloured glazes. Glazing also strengthens pottery and tiles and provides a waterproof barrier, so that they can be used outdoors or in domestic settings where water is used such in bathrooms and kitchens.

Contents and Ideas

'Composition' displays a combination of tenderness and strength that is typical of all Marks' work. The bright, geometrical design creates an atmosphere of child-like fun and energy, whilst the plain brown background gives a staid reliable background; mixing the two opposites of functional practicality and joyful exuberance.

Marks shared the Bauhaus vision to reunite all traditional art forms with industrial design and graphics. Through her pottery work, she aimed to diminish the divide between 'high' (drawing, painting, sculpture) and 'low' (craft-based and commercial) art.

About the Artist

Margaret Marks was born Margaret Heymann in Cologne, Germany, in 1899. She studied ceramics in Cologne and Dusseldorf and at the Bauhaus School in Weimar in 1920. She taught in Cologne and married in 1923; they moved to Berlin, in 1924, and set up a pottery factory. Tragically, in 1928, her husband, Gustav Loebenstein, was killed in a car accident, leaving Marks a widow with two young sons.

After the closure of her factory by the Nazi's and the move to England, Marks met her second husband, Harold Marks, whilst living in Stoke-on-Trent; they married in 1938. They were separated by the Second World War as Harold joined the army; during this time Margaret – or Grete as she was known – retreated to the Staffordshire Moorlands where she spent her time painting.

The Marks' were reunited at the end of the war and set up another factory together, which they transferred to London in 1946. Marks continued to live, work and exhibit in London until her death in 1990.

Why Is This Work Important?

Marks' work is important as it was created despite the Nazi's efforts to discredit her as an artist and business woman by closing down her factory in Germany. Had Marks not come to England and been able to persevere with her ceramics after the war, she, and her husband, would not have enjoyed success with their work and added to the achievements of Jewish people after the events of the holocaust.

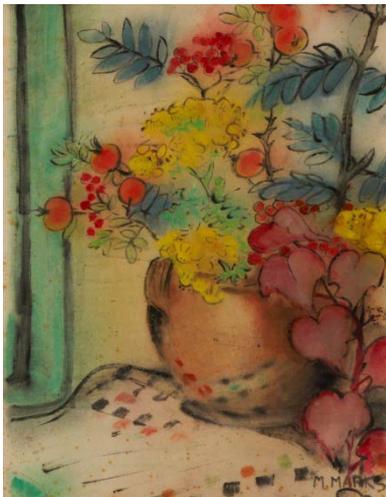
Marks' 'Composition' is an important example of Bauhaus values and the fusion of functionality with aesthetics. It signifies new beginnings in the perception of pottery, as it shifts from traditional styles and becomes more accessible to everyday homes in the new post-war England.

Other Works By Marks

'Dr. Barnett Stross MP', lithograph on paper, 1936.



'Flowers, Still Life', watercolour on paper, undated



'Leff Poushnoff, Pianist', lithograph on paper, 1933.



Terms Explained

Bauhaus A modernist art school founded by the architect Walter Gropius, in 1919. Its aim was to create new energy in the teaching of practical skills. Literally translated from German it means 'house of building'.

Fired- The process of 'baking' or 'drying' (pottery, tiles, bricks, etc.) in a large oven called a kiln.

Glaze- Ground glass mixed with iron oxides – applied to pottery in liquid form, creating a solid coating during the firing process.

Activity Points for Discussion

How do you think these tiles compare to more traditional styles of tile designs?

Does it matter that you can see some of Marks' original pencil lines on the tiles?

Do you think the colours chosen for this design are important? Would it have the same effect in black and white?

Why do you think Marks chose to use 9 tiles for the design instead of one large one?