

11/11/2024



Time Travellers Club

Dear Club Members,

Ninety five years ago, on 15th November 1929 florist Constance Spry unveiled her first window display on the window of Atkinsons, a London perfumery on Old Bond Street, London.

The display caused a stir in fashionable society as Spry had used hedgerow materials in amongst the flowers. She became known for her unique approach, that moulded the style of floral art in the one we recognise in our modern lives. Most modern wedding flowers owe their appearance to the style popularised by Spry. Her unique approach was heavily influenced by the painting style of the old Dutch masters, she often used edible plants like Kale, or foraged materials like Pussy Willow, and used unconventional display vases, and sometimes even used jam jars.

By 1937 her work was so recognised that she arranged the flowers for the wedding on the Duke of Windsor (formerly Edward VIII), and Wallis Simpson. She remained popular with the British Royal Family, and also arranged the wedding flowers of the then Princess Elizabeth, and Princess Margaret.

Her connections with Royalty continued, in 1953 she arranged the flowers in Westminster Abbey for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and together with her business partner Rosemary Hume created a new recipe for Coronation Chicken.

Spry had set up a domestic science school in 1946, she had been a teacher after the end of World War I and resumed that role during World War II. In 1942 she published a book called "Come in to the Garden, Cook", drawing on her knowledge of French cuisine to encourage British people to grow more food for their own consumption to help with the war effort.

Whilst her early life was privileged, it was also not easy. She was born in 1886, and later moved to Ireland where she studied hygiene, physiology and district nursing, she lectured on first aid and home care for the newly established Irish Women's National Health Association. She married James Heppell Marr in 1910 and in 1912, their son Anthony Heppell Marr was born. In 1914 she was appointed secretary of the Dublin Red Cross, but by 1916 she fled Ireland, returning to England with her young son, fleeing an abusive marriage. In 1917 she joined the civil service, working as the head of women's staff (welfare and medical treatment) at the Ministry of Aircraft Production, she also divorced her husband (an incredibly rare event, only 0.25% of marriages ended in divorce at that time). Later that year she lost two of her brothers in the war.

By 1921 she had moved to London, and it was here that she began teaching flower arranging to teenage factory workers at Homerton and South Hackney Day Continuation School, along with cookery and dressmaking. In 1926 she remarried, or maybe not... my research is conflicted on this, she certainly called Henry Spry her husband, but the marriage was purely one of convenience. By this point Spry was in a relationship with the painter Gluck, a fascinating individual in their own right, someone who defied gender norms of the time. Maybe a surprising partner for someone who seemed to match the perfect expectations of the talents expected of a woman. Despite all this unconventionality the "establishment" were clearly more than happy to continue commissioning her for work, and later sending their daughters to be educated at her school.

By 1934 Spry was employing 70 people in her shop, but at the start of World War II closed it down and returned to education, a profession which she never left, remaining at her school at Winkfield Place, Berkshire until her death. On 3rd January 1960, aged 70 she slipped on the stairs and fell, dying an hour later. Her last words were supposedly "Someone else can arrange this".

In later years of her life she was devoted to the cultivation of antique roses, which her floral arrangements were instrumental in bringing back to popularity. David Austen's first commercial rose introduction in 1961 was named in her honour.

Your fibre this month tries to honour the naturalistic colour combing that Spry was famous for. Harmonious and colourful, with a hint of rustic beauty. I hope she'd approve; rich and luxurious like the grand master paintings which inspired her.

'Do whatever you please. Follow your own star: be original if you want to be and don't if you don't want to be. Just be natural and gay and light-hearted and pretty and simple and overflowing and general and baroque and bare and austere and stylized and wild and daring and conservative. And learn and learn and learn. Open your mind to every form of beauty.'

—CONSTANCE SPRY

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

20% Eri Silk

20% BFL

60% Shetland

Further Reading-

Online Exhibition at the Garden Museum

<https://gardenmuseum.org.uk/exhibitions/constancespryonline/>

<https://londonflowerschool.com/journal/the-pioneering-life-of-constance-spry>

The new vase styles she created for her arrangements

<https://www.catherinesouthon.co.uk/news-blogs/life-of-spry-constance-spry-and-the-fulham-pottery/>