

# Demeter

By Luke King-Salter  
[www.jlks-art.com](http://www.jlks-art.com)

Robert Bridges (1844-1930) was an Oxford-based poet. His play *Demeter* was written “for the ladies of Somerville College” to mark the opening of the college library building in 1904. Though he became Poet Laureate in 1913, Bridges is not well known today. As a poet he was old-fashioned even in his own lifetime. But his play *Demeter* is worth remembering for its powerful statement of the problem of suffering in the natural world.

Its plot is based on the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*, telling of Persephone’s abduction by Hades and the efforts of her mother, Demeter, to rescue her from the underworld. But its concerns are more modern, with a strong focus on the psychological and philosophical implications of the myth.

This catalogue contains a series of paintings that illustrate themes from *Demeter*.

# Abstract Illustrations

The paintings in this series are what I call ‘abstract illustrations,’ because although they are abstract—they don’t depict anything concretely—they are nevertheless intended to complement the aspects of the play that I am trying to illustrate.

An abstract painting is similar to a piece of music—one is an arrangement of sounds in time, the other is an arrangement of colours in space. An abstract illustration is therefore similar to a song. A composer can take a poem and add music to make a new, semi-abstract artwork. A painter can do the same thing with visual imagery instead of music.

There is a slight difference: songs actually incorporate the text of the poem into their sound, whereas my paintings do not include any words. So in fact an abstract illustration is more similar to a piece of ‘program music,’ that is, purely instrumental music designed to complement an idea, a scene, or a literary work. Famous examples of this kind of music include *The Planets* by Holst, *Mazeppa* by Liszt, and *La Mer* by Debussy.

# Abstract Landscapes

*Demeter* is concerned first and foremost with the place of humanity within the natural world. It contrasts different ways of thinking about nature, and the place of humanity within it, in light of the transience of natural beauty and the mortality of all life. For that reason, all of the paintings can also be called abstract landscapes, because they all include a basic division between land and sky, and all contain various elements that are suggestive of natural forms. They use variations on this scheme to evoke different thoughts and feelings about nature, corresponding to different themes in the play.

# 1. Persephone with Artemis and Athena



*Acrylic on greyboard, 40 x 60 cm (64 x 84 cm mounted and framed). 2022.*

In the first scene of the play, Persephone leads Athena and Artemis to the fields of Enna, in Sicily, to admire the flowers. They are unimpressed by her “girlish fancy.”

Athena, goddess of wisdom, has a detached, philosophical attitude. Nothing in the world is intrinsically more lovely to her than anything else. Artemis, goddess of the hunt, is also dismissive, but for an opposite reason. She wants to participate in nature as fully as possible, a beast among beasts, hunting “the antler'd stag, that in the glade / With the coy gaze of his majestic fear / Faced thee a moment ere he turn'd to fly.”

Persephone is repelled by the inhumanity of both perspectives, feeling pity for the first time. Nevertheless, the words of Athena and Artemis are prescient. In the end, Persephone learns that even flowers have a dark side: emblematic of transience, death and fleeting beauty.



*Detail from Persephone with Artemis and Athena*

The painting is a mixed impression of natural forms, colours and textures: vitality, shooting growth, sunlight, sky, water and flowers, chaotically mingled with abstractions of dry leaves, twigs, rough weeds, earth and decay. It suggests the feeling of Persephone's first encounter with the brutality of nature, hidden within her instinctive love of living beauty.

There is an overall hazy yellow glow which evokes the radiant sunrise she describes at the beginning of the play—"this joy of earth, this penetrant / Palpitant exultation so unlike / The balanc't calm of high Olympian state."



## 2. The Coronation of Persephone



*Acrylic on greyboard, 43 x 84 cm. 2022.*

When Artemis and Athena depart, Persephone is kidnapped by Hades and taken to be his queen. Persephone's existence in the realm of the dead is not described in the play. Only after she returns does she tell Demeter about the "mystery of evil" into which she is initiated, descending into the horrific Cave of Cacophysisia where all the darkness and negativity of the world is concatenated.

This painting does not refer to dreaded Cave or the horrors surrounding it, but to the time—only implicit in the play—of Persephone's maturity and acceptance of her role as queen of the underworld. Bridges attempts to make the myth as palatable as possible for modern audiences. He does not describe Hades as evil or cruel, but as a genuine lover of Persephone who is compelled by Zeus to carry her off by force (Zeus will not allow any of his daughters to go willingly into the underworld). The realm of Hades is dark, lonely and cheerless, but not a place of suffering or punishment. Therefore the painting is eery but not sinister.

The composition suggests a luminous, jumbled cityscape divided by black rivers and canals. In the 'foreground' is the scene of the coronation, dismal but touching in its antique simplicity. Persephone is seated on the centre-right, her crescent crown on a cushion before her. Hades, to her left, bows in admiration. Behind him, further left, hooded courtiers huddle in a mass. All figures blend abstractly into the expanse of the city which looms into the distance behind them.

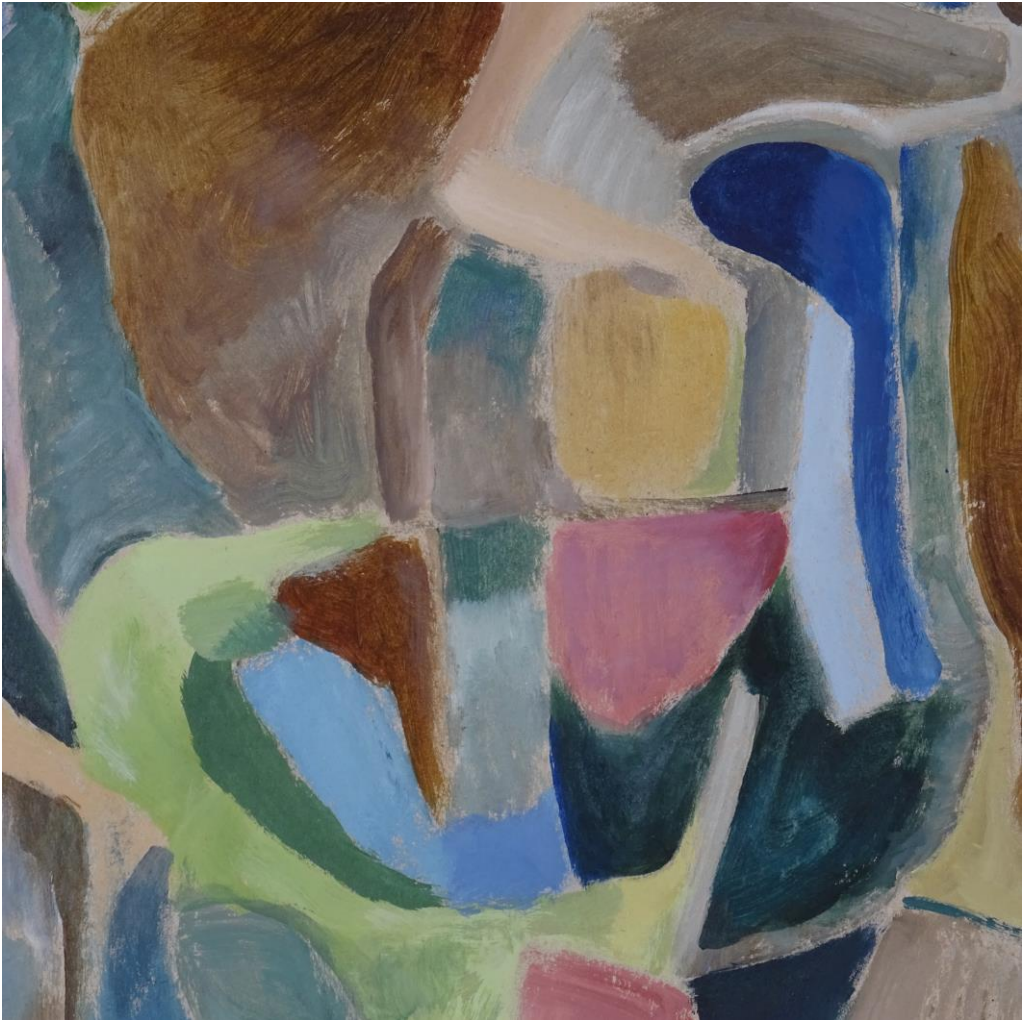
### 3. Demeter's Triumph



*Acrylic on greyboard, 59.5 x 84 cm. 2022.*

The central portion of the play describes Demeter's attempts to locate her daughter and win back her freedom. Although she is apparently powerless before the kings of heaven and hell, Demeter is the goddess of agriculture and, in a grand display of uncompromising maternal willpower, withholds rain from the earth. She knows that if humanity is destroyed by famine, the gods themselves will be starved of worshippers. This threat of mutually assured destruction succeeds and Zeus orders Hades to relinquish Persephone. This painting refers to the moment of Demeter's victory.





*Detail from Demeter's Triumph*

In the play, Demeter doesn't merely allow the crops to wither, she replaces them with useless weeds and flowers, in homage to her missing daughter:

There shall be dearth, and yet so gay the dearth  
That all the land shall look in holiday.

The medley of bright colours in the painting is therefore appropriate, combined with the dusty ochres and browns, as an indication of the barren farmland covered with useless plants of every colour, "every field with splendour aflame." The top region of the painting suggests a sky dark and heavy with rain, presaging the end of Demeter's drought, while the bright green and yellow 'fields' contrasting with the 'sky' suggest the strong angular illumination of the sun peeking through storm clouds.

## 4. Persephone (The End of Winter)



*Acrylic on greyboard, 40 x 60 cm (64 x 84 cm mounted and framed). 2022.*

Demeter's enthusiasm turns to grief when she discovers that her daughter cannot permanently depart from Hades. When Persephone returns, however, she has matured and accepted her fate a blessing.

Persephone comes to understand that to be queen of the underworld is appropriate for the goddess of flowers, which are fleeting in their beauty. Spring implies winter, and rebirth implies death. She accepts the melancholy implications of her chosen path, without accepting the inhumanity of Artemis or Athena.

Though it refers to the same moment of the play, this painting is very different in technique and palette from *Demeter's Triumph*. Instead of discrete blocks of intense colour, here there are flowing lines, line-fragments and layers of translucent, autumnal colours.

The composition began with a simplified scheme of three figures: Persephone in the middle, and two of her Oceanides—the sea nymphs that form her entourage—standing gracefully at either side. This scheme is still visible, but in a highly abstracted form.



## 5. Persephone (The Return of Spring)



*Acrylic on greyboard, 59.5 x 84 cm. 2022.*

After the end of winter, spring returns—this painting is a more vibrant answer to the previous one. It represents the more joyous, less melancholy aspect of Persephone's return from the underworld, carrying with her the promise of renewal and renewed delight in the beauty of nature.

On one level, it is a reappearance of the maiden Persephone who, in the beginning, led Artemis and Athena through the fields of flowers. But she is a changed goddess. The power of Persephone's vision has now been tempered by knowledge. The 'landscape' surrounding the central bloom of colours is still dark, earthy and disordered, but, in answer to this, the light is more concentrated and the sky deeper.

## 6. Eleusis I – The Gates



*Acrylic on greyboard, 23 x 40 cm (44 x 54 cm mounted and framed). 2022.*

The Eleusinian Mysteries were the secret rites in which Demeter and Persephone were worshipped in Ancient Greece, at Eleusis, near Athens. Following the Homeric *Hymn*, Bridges' play provides a kind of origin story for these rites.

While searching for her lost daughter on earth, Demeter becomes sympathetic to the sufferings of humanity. She arrives in Eleusis in the form of an old woman and is taken into the king's household as a nanny, caring for the new-born prince Demophöon. She uses this as an opportunity to rescue at least one human being from the shackles of mortality, making him godlike by secretly anointing him with ambrosia and cleansing him in the fires of the hearth.

Before the process is complete, the queen sees what is happening and dismisses Demeter for fear of witchcraft. Demeter is dismayed but realises that she must now do something to help all humans, not only one. She then decides to establish the temple of Eleusis, where, she says, "in the sorrow that I underwent / Man's state is pattern'd; and in picture shewn / The way of his salvation."

In the play, the Mysteries are imagined as incorporating both a heavenly and a hellish vision, revealing the world to be fundamentally good and bad in turn. Demeter devised the first element during her time on earth when, searching in vain for her lost daughter, she takes pity on suffering humanity. The second element derives from Persephone's experiences in the underworld, where she is introduced by Hades to the Cave of Cacophysis, a concentrated vision of evil.

Demeter's planned temple does not seem to reconcile these two visions, and it is unclear how they are supposed to show her mortal worshippers "The way of their salvation." The Mysteries remain mysterious. As in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* there is an irresolvable dichotomy between two worldviews, one naively optimistic and the other grimly pessimistic, and readers are left to draw their own conclusions.

This dichotomy emerges in the style and substance of the paintings. Stylistically, there is an uneasy marriage of Kleeish naivety (innocence, otherworldliness) and Cezannesque fussiness (experience, hard won realism). In their substance, the three paintings are abstracted 'views' of an imaginary Eleusis-citadel and mountainous surroundings, with a progression that also comments on the dichotomy of the underlying theme.

In the first painting, the orange triangle of the Eleusinian temple is in the 'background.' The black chasm and bar-like forms indicate the pessimistic perspective, doubly representing the gates to Eleusis and to Hades.

In the second, the temple/city is in full view. The style is the most ordered, the geometry most rectilinear and the forms most easy to parse, but as a consequence there is a sense of coldness or sterility in the central section. There are mountains rising in the background, and the foreground falls away precipitously, indicating that we are here at a mid-point, not an end.

In the third, we have ascended into the mountains above the citadel. There are suggestions of the original chasm and vertical structures of the first two paintings, but more naturalistic, and the style is less naive.

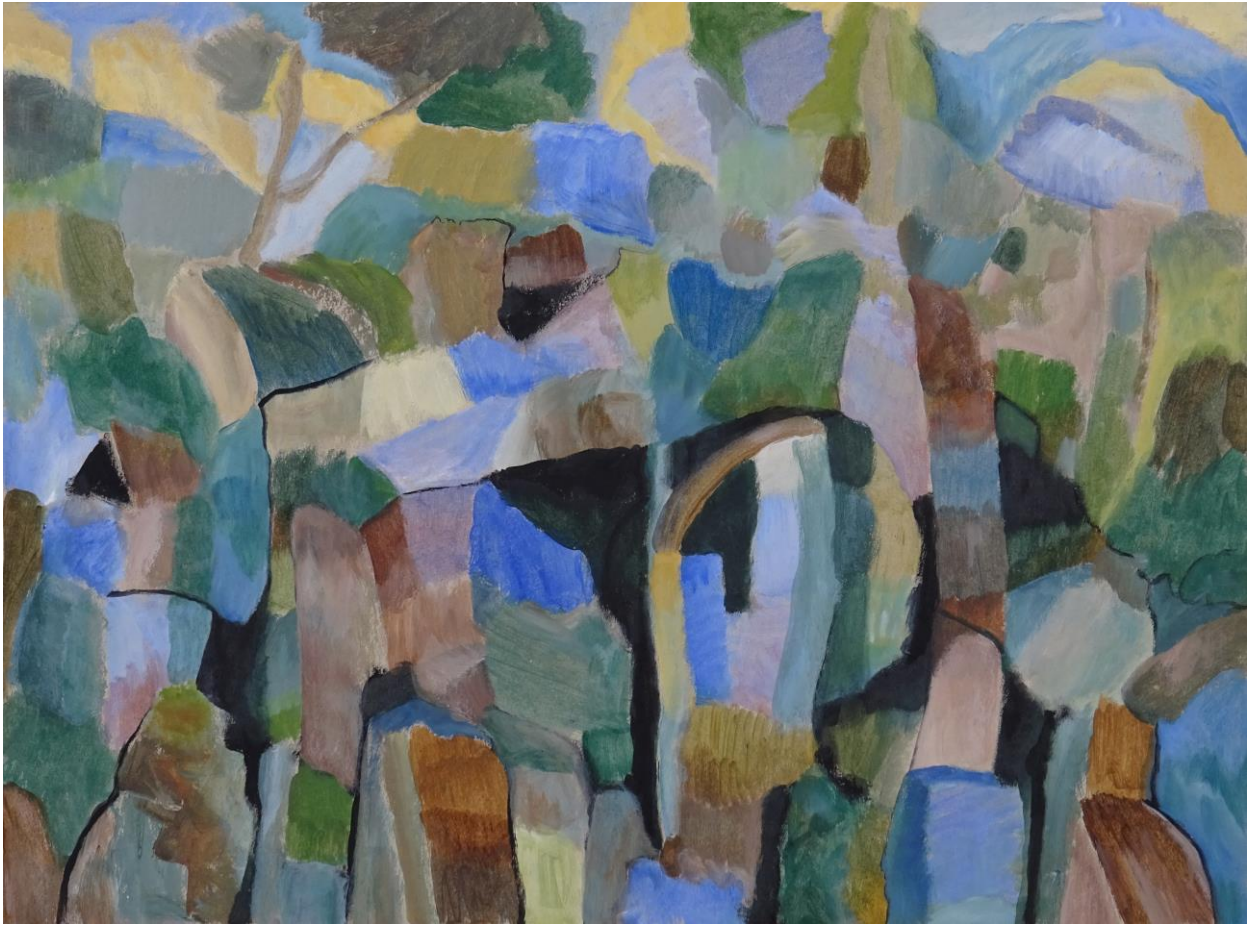


## 7. Eleusis II – The Citadel



*Acrylic on greyboard, 23 x 40 cm (44 x 54 cm mounted and framed). 2022.*

## 8. Eleusis III – The Mountainside



*Acrylic on greyboard, 23 x 40 cm (44 x 54 cm mounted and framed). 2022.*

The thematic and stylistic progression in the series forms a kind of dialectical sequence. The third painting is a synthesis of the first two. On one level, it is a middle ground - stylistically it is the wild, earthy reality in between the hellish and heavenly perspectives of the first two paintings, with their elements suggestive of depths and heights. On another level, it is above them and represents an escape from their dichotomy - the orange triangle of Eleusis, with its self-contradictory Mysteries, is 'behind' and 'below' the viewer. In fact, there are no elements suggesting human civilization.

The Eleusinian Mysteries are lost, and, in any case, they belong to a bygone age. That is why Bridges wrote a play, instead of suggesting that the Greek religion itself should be revived. For the same reason, perhaps, this sequence of paintings passes through Eleusis and comes to an end beyond it.