



William Alfred Ismay, MBE

Collector

Born: 10 April 1910

Died: 13 January 2001

ARTY FACT!

Ismay was easy to spot when he visited exhibitions as a collector. He wore his version of a superhero cape and tights - a black beret pulled well onto his head, and he always had his huge magnifying glass in his pocket, ready to whip out and inspect the surface of pots before he bought them.

Ismay's Life

Ismay was an only child born in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. His mother, Sarah, was an Elementary school teacher, and his father, Alfred, was a cloth presser.

William Alfred Ismay, or Bill, as he was known to his friends, was not an artist. He was a Librarian and importantly, someone who appreciated art, especially pottery. He loved pots and loved to collect them. He didn't have lots of money nor did he live in luxury. In fact, Bill lived in Wakefield his whole life in his childhood home on Welbeck Street, spending every penny he had on travelling across the country going to exhibitions and buying studio pottery. Studio pottery is handmade pottery, made from clay by an individual potter, or artist, in a studio, rather than mass-produced pottery made in factories.

He wasn't always a librarian or a collector. During the Second World War he served as a Signaller in the Royal Signal Corps, spending time in the Far East and India. In 1943 Ismay's father died. After the war he returned to the terraced house on Welbeck street to live with his mother.

What makes Ismay special?

In 1955 he started his collection, and by 2001 he had over 3,600 pots, displaying them all around his small, terraced house, putting his treasures on shelves, on tables, on the stairs and even on the floor! He was the Curator of his very own personal Gallery at home, inviting people who were seriously interested in all things clay to visit, showing his 'family of pots' off like a proud parent.

To get the first choice of pots to add to his collection, Ismay would arrive at an exhibition early to be first in line to buy. He often cycled for hours or put his encyclopaedic knowledge of train timetables to good use! When Ismay found a potter whose work interested him, he would keep collecting their work as their style and skill developed over time. He liked many artists and collected works by Bernard Leach, Elizabeth Fritsch, Hans Coper, Rosemary Wren, Shoji Hamada and Lucie Rie, to name only a few of the many pots that can be seen on display in York Art Gallery.

In 1981, Ismay was awarded the MBE for services to studio pottery, which shows just how influential he was as a collector and the importance of his collection.

Bill was determined to keep his pots together in his home county, Yorkshire. His collection, which includes work by some of the most important potters of the 20th century, is now looked after by York Art Gallery. Thanks to his help, York Art Gallery is home to an internationally important collection of British studio pottery, with collectors following in Bill's footsteps and continuing to donate pieces to grow York Art Gallery's collection.

WHAT CAN YOU SEE?

Can you find work by Rosemary Wren, one of the artists Ismay collected?
What is the name of the work?
What does it tell you about the pottery?

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Do you collect anything?
Why not make your own gallery at home and display your collection of things like Ismay? Think about how you arrange and display them, you could even write labels for them and think of imaginative titles for your objects!