

Untitled

Margaret Mellis, who died on March 17 2009 aged 95, was one of the last surviving artists from the St Ives group of the 1930s, though it was in Suffolk, rather than Cornwall, that she developed a style that was most distinctively her own.

Colour was her true element. Before the war she studied at the Edinburgh College of Art, where she was taught by the Scottish colourist SJ Peploe. During the war she lived and worked in Cornwall and came under the influence of Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson, who encouraged her to concentrate on structure. Her work after that developed a strong constructivist flavour, seen in the often severely geometric collages and wooden assemblages she began to make during the war.

A move to Southwold on the Suffolk coast in 1976 prompted Margaret Mellis to begin using pieces of driftwood - blistered and broken pieces of boat and beach hut, with colours scoured by the sea. She assembled them in original abstract colour compositions in which semi-representational images often appeared. This work won her a new generation of admirers, including Damien Hirst, who spotted her work in a Cork Street gallery before he went to art school and was "blown away" by it.

In 2001 Hirst wrote an affectionate introduction to a catalogue of an exhibition of her work held in London and at Newlyn.

Hirst expressed the view that she had been unjustly neglected and deserved to be "up there - large on the map with her contemporaries". Last year their works were exhibited side by side in Tate Britain, and a full retrospective exhibition of her works was shown in Edinburgh and Norwich.

Margaret Mellis was born to Scottish parents in China on January 22 1914. Her father was a missionary, but returned to Britain to enlist as a soldier when the First World War broke out. Margaret had her first birthday on board the ship returning them to England.

As a child growing up in Edinburgh, Margaret first

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decided she wanted to be a musician. But she had always painted for fun, and when a friend of her parents saw her work he suggested she should study art instead.

At Edinburgh College of Art her instinctive feel for colour was recognised by Peplow, and she scooped several prizes - including a travel scholarship to Paris to study with the cubist painter André Lhote. On a visit to Munich in 1936 she met the art historian and painter Adrian Stokes and felt an immediate physical attraction. "I knew he was going to try to pick me up so I sat down and waited for him," she recalled.

Moving to London, Mellis attended the Euston Road School for a year before she and Stokes married in 1938. The following year, with war looming, they moved out of harm's way to Little Parc Owles, a large house overlooking St Ives Bay in Cornwall.

They had not been there long when Stokes announced he was inviting Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and their triplets to stay. "They stayed for about six months, and they were very difficult people," Margaret Mellis recalled. "Everyone was jealous of everyone else." They were soon joined by other refugees, including the Russian constructivist Naum Gabo.

In 1946, Margaret Mellis's marriage to Stokes ended and she left Cornwall with their young son. But she was then introduced to the poet and artist Francis Davison, and they married in 1948. They borrowed a fisherman's shack at Walberswick, Suffolk, before moving to a primitive but idyllic cottage at Syleham, near Diss, where they grew barley because it was subsidised and kept hens to sell the eggs.

In 1976 they moved to Southwold, and it was while collecting driftwood for fuel that Margaret realised its potential for her wall reliefs. After Davison's death in 1984, Margaret Mellis embarked on an immensely productive phase which lasted until 2001; in addition to her driftwood sculptures, she returned to her early figurative roots, drawing flowers from life on the backs of opened-out envelopes. She remained vigorous, swimming in the sea all year round and cycling and tap dancing well into her eighties.

She is survived by her son, the artist Telfer Stokes.