

The artist Henry Moore: Power and humanity

Moore at Kew, London exhibition until March 30, 2008

Paul Mitchell
3 December 2007

If you are in London in the next few months and have a few pounds in your pocket, spend a day at Kew Botanical Gardens. Amongst the white painted greenhouses you will find 28 large sculptures surrounded by cone-laden pines or autumnal trees shedding their last red, gold and brown leaves. If you're lucky you will see them wrapped in an early morning mist, their bronze surfaces glinting in a clear blue midday sky or absorbing a blood red evening sun.

The sculptures date from the last 30 years of the life of Henry Moore (1898-1986) when he had become one of the world's most famous artists, bombarded with prizes, degrees and honours and feted by people prepared to pay for the sort of expensive bronzes displayed at Kew.

Draped Reclining Mother and Baby (1983) combines three of the most important themes that Moore reworked throughout his life—the reclining figure, the mother-child relationship and the embryo-like “internal-external” forms idea.

Moore explained, “The great, the continual, everlasting problem (for me) is to combine sculptural form (POWER) with human sensibility and meaning, that is, to try to keep Primitive Power with humanist content.” He said he struggled to bring to his sculpture “a force, [is] a strength, [is] a life, a vitality from inside it, so that you have a sense that the form is pressing from inside trying to burst or trying to give off the strength from inside itself, rather than having something which is just shaped from outside and stopped.” Try clenching your fist and seeing your knuckles pushing through the skin, Moore said, and you will see what he means.

In contrast *Knife Edge Two Piece* (1962-65), a copy of which stands outside the Houses of Parliament in London, is much more abstract. Face on, the sculpture confronts you as a massive wall of golden bronze, but as you walk around it the slices through it break up that sense of being overwhelmed.

The same feeling of power with humanity can be felt with *Large Upright Internal/External Form* (1981-82). Although it is several metres high it exudes vulnerability and protectiveness. Moore valued “monumentality”, which he defined as not “merely big and heavy” or simple, but “strong, full of vitality.” A small Cezanne painting, he explained, can be monumental.

The other sculptures can be explored interactively on the Moore at Kew Sculpture Map <http://www.kew.org/henry-moore/explore/>

Aesthetically, one can see Moore's work in the context of his attempts to address universal human themes and break through the confines of the material—wood, stone and metal. As important is an understanding of Moore's sculptures as they emerged during the convulsions that shook the beginning of the twentieth century and continued throughout his life. Although there is not a straight line between artistic and broader social development, an understanding of the world from which a given artist draws influences, ideas and feelings is essential.

Moore was born in 1898, the seventh of eight children, in the coalmining town of Castleford, Yorkshire, England. His father was a socialist-minded engineer in the local mine and an active trade unionist.

By the time Henry was 11 years-old he had already decided he wanted to be a sculptor, but the First World War interrupted his ambitions.

Artists reacted to the slaughter they experienced as soldiers in the trenches with disgust, not just at the carnage of imperialism but with bourgeois society as a whole. Some took their revolt a step further and sided with the revolutionary struggle of the working class, which found its highest expression in the October Revolution. The revolution, together with the Bolshevik government's policy of encouraging the widest artistic and intellectual freedom and experimentation, inspired the artistic world. Other artists, who were not so politically committed, made significant contributions to the development of various trends in modern art in the period between the world wars.

Although these events may not have penetrated Moore's consciousness as directly as they did many others—he later claimed, despite a poison gas attack in France that he went through the war in “the romantic haze of hoping to be a hero”—they unquestionably conditioned the cultural and social climate in which he worked and developed.

After the war in 1919, Moore became the first ever student of sculpture at Leeds School of Art. He drew inspiration from the new publications on African sculpture and Ancient American art—seen by many artists as antidotes to bourgeois tastes and conventions. For Moore, “one had to throw all that over and start again from the beginning of primitive art.” For a number of years, Moore had little time for Greek and Renaissance art and, although he had some praise for Michaelangelo and Donatello, he criticised the former's early work for its smooth perfection and the latter's “modelling”, which he thought had “sapped the manhood” out of Western sculpture. A six-month Royal College of Art scholarship to study Renaissance art in 1926 began to change his mind and in later life he often spoke of his debt to that art.

Moore said it was the sharp contrast between primitive art's three-dimensional quality and “truth to material” and the “terrible state” of sculpture around him with its “entirely representational and decorative” features that inspired him. In particular, Mexican art such as the Chacmool reclining figure expressed the “richness of feeling for life and its wonder and mystery” and clearly influenced Moore's first public commission, the West Wind Relief (1928) for the new London Transport headquarters.

The same influence can be seen in the Reclining Figure (1929), which shows the first signs of the sculptured holes and hollows that became his trademark. When it went on public display it received many hostile reviews. The *Daily Mirror* labelled it a “monstrosity... which surpassed in repulsiveness even that of [Jacob] Epstein.” Moore regarded Epstein (1880-1959), along with Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957) as the pioneers of modern sculpture. The *London Morning Post* said of Moore's work, “The cult of ugliness triumphs at the hands of Mr. Moore. He shows an utter contempt for the natural beauty of women and children, and in doing so, deprives even stone of its value as a means of aesthetic and emotional expression.”

Moore said the reclining figure theme allowed him the most freedom

unlike seated figures or standing figures, which are liable to break at the ankles. (Moore explained how the Egyptians had to strengthen their stone statues with wooden supports and the Greeks used drapery to provide a thicker base.)

Moore saw himself as part of an international movement and regularly visited Paris from the early 1920s. There he drew on the work of avant-garde artists, particularly Picasso, Arp and Giacometti. In 1929 Moore and Irina Radetsky whom he had just married moved to Hampstead in north London, a dynamic melting pot for artists and intellectuals such as Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson and which included many foreign exiles like the Russian constructivist Naum Gabo who had fled Nazi persecution. One of Moore's sculptures appeared in a Nazi exhibition of degenerate art. Moore also gained the attention of Herbert Read who wrote the first monograph on his work and later became the president of the Institute of Contemporary Art and Kenneth Clark, director of the National Gallery.

Moore joined Unit One, formed in 1933 by Paul Nash, to "stand for the expansion of a truly contemporary spirit" and promote surrealist and abstract art. His work during this period, such as *Four-Piece Composition* (1934), as with that of all the Surrealists, was guided by the aim of revolutionizing art and perception, rejecting many of the artistic conventions of the past, while seeking to preserve their best traditions. At the same time he rejected the "violent quarrel" between the proponents of Surrealism and Abstract Art as "quite unnecessary", saying, "All good art has contained both abstract and surrealist elements, just as it has contained both classical and romantic elements—order and surprise, intellect and imagination, conscious and unconscious."

During this period Moore also gained greater international recognition, including the display of his *Two Forms* (1934) at the Cubism and Abstract Art Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In 1936, Moore signed the Surrealist manifesto and served on the London International Surrealist Exhibition committee. In the same year he also signed the English Surrealist Group's "Declaration on Spain" written in opposition to the British government's policy of non-intervention in the Civil War that had erupted when General Franco launched his uprising against the Spanish Revolution. Moore attempted to go to Spain in a delegation of English artists and writers, but the British government refused them permission to travel. The Spanish Prisoner print drawn for the Spanish Prisoners Appeal in 1939 shows a forlorn face encased in barbed wire, bars and concrete.

In 1938 Moore produced his first large scale stone sculpture, *Recumbent Figure*, which was bought by the architect Serge Chermayeff for his garden. For Moore the undulating folds of the figure acted as a link between Chermayeff's modernist house and the ancient rolling hills of southern England. He manages to open out the sculpture in such a way that form and space achieve "an equal partnership to make them inseparable, neither being more important than the other."

When a bomb damaged Moore's Hampstead home in 1940 during World War II, he and Irina moved to a farmhouse 40 kilometres north of the capital where they were to live modestly, despite increasing wealth, for the rest of their lives. Those left in London took to the underground railway system during air raids because there were insufficient official shelters and despite government attempts to stop them. Moore's experience of the "unbelievable scenes and life" he found there were expressed in drawings such as the *Study for 'Tube Shelter Perspective: The Liverpool Street Extension'* (1940-41). He compared them to "a hold of a slave ship on its way from Africa to America, full of hundreds and hundreds of people who were having things done to them that they were quite powerless to resist."

The shelter drawings came to the attention of the War Artists' Advisory Committee under its chairman, Sir Kenneth Clark, who appointed Moore an Official War Artist in 1941. These drawings, together with those he

made subsequently in the coalmines of Yorkshire, were Moore's attempts show sympathy with the victims of war and not to glorify it.

In 1944 Moore completed his stone carving *Madonna and Child*. Although it was commissioned for St Matthew's church in Northampton it has a very human down-to-earth feel about it. This change of direction was criticised by his modernist supporters, but his more life-like representations resonated with a population tired of the horrors of war and yearning for change.

These broad sentiments signalled the approach of another revolutionary upheaval that threatened to surpass that following the First World War. It drove the Labour government to create the welfare state and enact measures for a more even distribution of wealth. Moore's first major work in bronze *Family Group* (1948-49) for Stevenage School was made possible by the government's massive building programme, replacing slums with new "garden cities" such as Stevenage and a dramatic increase in official sponsorship of the arts. The fluid nature of the metal gave Moore the opportunity to develop a whole new body of work that he "couldn't do in stone."

In 1948 Moore was Britain's sole representative at the prestigious Venice Biennale and in winning its international prize for sculpture he was catapulted to fame. The British Council, which exhibited his work in 82 exhibitions between 1950 and 1960, made particular use of him to promote British art in the atmosphere of the Cold War.

But Moore was no mere propaganda tool. At an international conference of artists organised by Unesco in 1952 he explained, "We live in a transitional age, between one economic structure of society which is in dissolution and another economic order of society which has not yet taken definite shape." He criticised the West for its "arbitrary system" entailing "much suffering and injustice" particularly for younger artists and the Soviet Union as an authoritarian system where style was determined by the State. He told his audience, "I think socialist realist artists would like to get at it: but of course they can't because it's done in a superficial academic way and artists simply aren't up to it. It's only a great humanist like Giovanni Pisano, or Masaccio or Rembrandt or Cezanne who can express the tremendous power of goodness that exists somewhere in human nature." Above all, he pleaded somehow artists must have their freedom and independence.

In 1957 Moore was appointed chairman of the International Auschwitz Memorial Competition, but the jury was unable to agree a winner. Moore wondered if a work of art "can express the emotions engendered by Auschwitz" and his belief that perhaps "a very great sculptor—a new Michelangelo or a new Rodin—might have achieved this."

Major exhibitions followed around the world in the latter part of his life, including Madrid, New York, Hong Kong, Japan and New Delhi. One of Moore's most celebrated exhibitions took place in Florence, Italy, at Michelangelo's Forte di Belvedere in 1972 when 350,000 people came to see nearly 300 sculptures.

Henry Moore died at the age of 88 in August 1986, mourned by the public and the press. "Since the death of Sir Winston Churchill, Henry Moore has been the most internationally acclaimed of Englishmen, honoured by every civilized country in the world," proclaimed the right-wing *Daily Telegraph*. Others were not so moved. Some radicals criticised him for his wealth and influence and for betraying his class. Modernists blamed him for watering down modernism and post-modernists for stereotyping women.

These critics are missing the central point, which is to distinguish the objectively truthful elements from what was historically and artistically limited in Moore's work. Although the inter-war movements had limitations, their liberating themes, particularly those of the Surrealists, aligned them with the struggle for human emancipation and against the growing threat of fascism. Their collapse is bound up with far-reaching social questions, above all, with the great defeat of socially progressive

movements at the hands of Stalinism and fascism.

To a degree Moore seemed to run out of new ideas after the war. Nevertheless, he still believed that great art was “marked by a deep human understanding... a nobility that raises everyday life to a height that gives you a new faith in it and a new excitement.” He also said, “All good art demands an effort from the observer and he should demand that it extends his experience of life.”

These are concepts that are rarely heard today and Moore should be remembered and respected for them.

An archive of Henry Moore’s work can be found at <http://www.henry-moore-fdn.co.uk/>



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact