



Close-Up on Art

By Robert Barrett

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Artist: Henry Moore (1898 – 1986)

Title: Two Piece Reclining Figure
No. 3

Date: 1961, Perry Green,
Hertfordshire, England

Medium: Bronze, Edition 1/7

Donor: Gwendolyn Weiner

Category: Modern

“The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for the rest of your life. And the most important thing is, it must be something you cannot possibly do.” Henry Moore

During World War II Moore served the British government as an “Official War Artist”. His drawings of the huddled masses in the Underground during the aerial bombardment of London made him a household name. The experience of producing these *Shelter Drawings* greatly impacted the artist and helped him humanize his heretofore more formalistic approach in his art practice. The drawings also helped launch his international career. Immediately after the War he began to win prestigious commissions. He represented Britain in domestic and international exhibitions. His work was collected globally and he garnered worldwide media attention.* Moore became a renowned lecturer and commentator on the arts. He served on museum boards and donated many of his works To the National Museums of the United Kingdom. All his success never changed Henry Moore’s modest demeanor and kindly disposition. Sadly, his achievements and generosity rankled many other British artists as they felt he dominated the exhibition and commission opportunities in mid-20th century Britain. However, this tempest was a fly on the back of an elephant as Henry Moore occupies an eminent and unique position in the pantheon of sculptors throughout the history of art that expressed the essence of their time.**

Henry Moore was the son of a miner who encouraged his many children to become educated. From an early age his facility to express himself artistically was observed and nurtured by his teachers. Following World War I, he used a serviceman’s grant to study art, first at Leeds, and then at The Royal College of Art in London. A grant funded

trip to Italy exposed the young artist to the Renaissance masters. Michelangelo as well as Rodin, Picasso, Matisse and Brancusi, became his touchstones. Frequent visits to the British Museum to study its vast ethnographic collection rich in African, Aztec and Cycladic art influenced the young artist to gradually develop an abstract yet figurative style that was both modern and timeless in its expressive power. He strived to combine sculptural forms with human sensibility. He labored for 30 years until he realized his unique sculptural idiom. Thereafter his success was meteoric.

Following World War II, in stark contrast to Fascism, Henry Moore's work came to represent the optimistic humanist values of modernism. Abstracted human forms, particularly of women and children placed out of doors in the county-side, embodied British determination to rebuild and thrive. These works also harken to something primal in the character and determination of the British people. Seemingly ancient, yet modern sentinels, Moore's sculptures guard against the tyrannical dark forces that had twice in the 20th-century pulled apart the civilized world. Forces that had come close to destroying the United Kingdom.

Henry Moore stated, *"There are three fundamental poses of the human figure. One is standing. The other is seated, and the third is lying down... Of the three poses, the reclining figure gives the most freedom, compositionally and spatially."* *Two Piece Reclining Figure No. 3* is a superb example of Moore's mature intention and artistic capabilities with the reclined female form. This monumental work was sculpted in plaster and then cast in bronze. At first glance this work brings to mind pediment figures on ancient Greek and Roman temples. Yet this piece is grounded, earth bound, more primal than any classical temple decoration. Here we have the artist's definitive amalgamation of the resting female form and landscape; rocks have morphed into woman or vice versa. Negative spaces are hewn through the torso echoing breaches between boulders in an out cropping of rocks. Two masses, together yet separate, heighten the impression of boulders. Rough scraped and chiseled marks scar the figure forms that never-the-less remains composed in a magnificent reclined position of regal power. The sculpture observes us with the might of Mother Nature; a Goddess hewn from the essence of British collective imagination and tribal memory.

*On September 21, 1959 Henry Moore was featured on the cover of Time Magazine

**Michelangelo: Italy, Rodin: France and Henry Moore: Britain.

References

Henry Moore Foundation @ www.henry-moore.org

John Read 1967 BBC One Hour Documentary Henry Moore One Yorkshire Mans Look at His World

Hyman, E. (Ed.) & Nash, S., Cornell, D., Giles, C., Gladstone, M., Hough, K.P., Williams, S., 2013 - 75 Years 75 Artworks: Selections from the Permanent Collection. Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Art Museum.