

Barbara Hepworth

Home
Wakefield
St Ives
Sculptures
Biography
Commissions
Public exhibitions
Past exhibitions
Publications
Catalogue Raisonné
Texts
Site map
Links

Copyright

All images and texts included on this website are protected by copyright. They may be reproduced for personal or educational use only.

Quotations from Barbara Hepworth's Writings

Extract from Hepworth's statement in the series 'Creative Responses to the Architecture of the Association Journal, London, vol. XLV, no. 518, April 1930, p. 384

"Carving to me is more interesting than modelling, because there is an unlimited variety of materials from which to draw inspiration. Each material demands a particular treatment and there are an infinite number of subjects to which to create in a particular material. In fact, it would be possible to carve the same subject in a different stone each time, throughout life, without a repetition of form. If a pebble or an egg can be enjoyed for the sake of its shape only, it is one step towards a true appreciation of sculpture. A tree trunk, with its changing axis, swellings and varied sections, fully understood, takes us a step further. Then finally it is realised that abstract form, the relation of masses and planes, is that which gives sculptural life; this, then, admits that a piece of sculpture can be purely abstract or non-representational."

Extracts from 'Barbara Hepworth – "the Sculptor carves because he must"', *The Studio*, London, vol. 104, December 1932, p. 332

"The sculptor carves because he must. He needs the concrete form of stone and wood for the expression of his idea and experience, and when the idea forms the material is found at once. [...] I have never experienced a creative carving. The Architectural resistance of the hard material and feel happier working that way. Carving is more adapted to the expression of the accumulative idea of experience and clay to the visual attitude. An idea for carving must be clearly formed before starting and sustained during the long process of working; also, there are all the beauties of several hundred different stones and woods, and the idea must be in harmony with the qualities of each one carved; that harmony comes with the discovery of the most direct way of carving each material according to its nature."

Extract from Hepworth's statement in *Unit 31 The Modern Movement in Europe: Architecture, Painting and Sculpture*, edited by Herbert Read, London, 1934, p. 19

"Carving is interrelated masses conveying an emotion; a perfect relationship between the mind and the colour; light and weight which is the stone, made by the hands which feels. It must be so essentially sculpture that it can exist in no other way, something completely the right way, in itself, has growth, something still and yet having movement, so very quiet and yet with a real vitality."

Extracts from 'Sculpture', in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, ed. by J.L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, London, 1937, p. 13

"Full sculptural expression is an idea, either by mass or by space construction. The materials for sculpture are unlimited in their variety of quality, tenseness and aliveness. But for the imaginative idea to be fully and freely projected into stone, wood or any plastic substance, a complete sensibility and an understanding of its inherent quality and character - is required. There must be a perfect unity between the idea, the substance and the dimension: this unity gives scale... Vitality is not a physical, organic attribute of sculpture - it is a spiritual inner life."

"'Abstract' is a word which is now most frequently used to express only the type of the outer form of a work or art; this makes it difficult to use in relation to the spiritual vitality or inner life which the real sculpture. Abstract sculptural qualities are found in good sculpture of all time, but it is significant that contemporary sculpture and painting have become abstract in thought and concept. As the sculptural idea is in itself unfettered and unlimited and can choose its own forms, the vital concept selects the form and substance of its expression quite unconsciously."

Extract from 'Approach to Sculpture', in *The Studio*, London, vol. 132, no. 643, October 1946

"I have always been interested in oval or ovoid shapes. The first carvings were simple realistic forms of the human head or of a bird. Gradually my interest grew in more abstract values - the weight, pose, and curvature of the ovoid as a basic form. The carving and piercing of such a form seems to open up an infinite variety of continuous curves in the third dimension, changing in accordance with the contours of the original ovoid and the varied sections of power and of the mineral. Here is sufficient field for exploration to last a lifetime."

"Before I can start carving the idea must be almost complete. I say 'almost' because the really important thing seems to be the sculptor's ability to let his intuition guide him over the gap between conception and realization without compromising the integrity of the original idea; the point being that the material has a tendency to resist and makes demands."

"I have gained very great inspiration from Cornish land- and sea-scape, the horizontal line of the sea and the quality of light and colour which reminds me of the Mediterranean light and colour which so excites me over the sea. I have been fascinated by the structure of figures which in the country becomes a face and moving part of a greater whole. This relationship between figure and landscape is vitally important to me. I cannot feel it in a city."

Extracts from *Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings*, with an introduction by Herbert Read, London, 1952

from Chapter 1: The excitement of discovering the nature of carving, 1903-1930

"A chance remark by Ardingi, an Italian master carver whom I met there in autumn, first there is a comparative newcomer to the studio, which made me decide immediately that it was not dominance which one had to attain over material, but an understanding, almost a kind of persuasion, and above all greater co-ordination between head and hand. This thought has recurred again and again ever since - and has developed my greatest interest, the reason why people both move differently and stand differently in direct response to changed surroundings; the unconscious grouping of people when they are working together, producing a spatial movement which approximates to the structure of spirals in shells or rhythms in crystal structure; the meaning of the spaces between forms, or the shape of the displacement of the object in space, in more or less direct response to the action. All these responses spring from a factual and tactile approach to the object - whether it be the feeling of landscape which one feels beneath one's feet or the sensitivity of the hand in carving, or in surgery, or music, and they have an organic and perceptual purpose."

"There is an inside and an outside to every form. When they are in special accord, as for instance a nut in its shell or a child in the womb, or in the structure of shells or crystals, or when one senses the architecture of bones in the human figure, then I am most drawn to the effect of light. Every shadow cast by the sun from an ever-varying angle reveals the harmony of the inside to outside. Light gives full play to our tactile perceptions through the experience of our eyes, and the vitality of forms is revealed by the interplay between space and volume."

"At this time [1928-9] all the carvings were an effort to find a personal accord with the stones or wood which I was carving. I was fascinated by the new problem which arose out of each sculpture, and by the kind of form that grew out of achieving a personal harmony with the material. By 1930, I felt sure that I could respond to all the varieties of wood growth or stone structure and texture. The *Head* carved in 1930 expressed that feeling of freedom, and a new period began in which my idea formed independently of the block. I wanted to break down the accepted order and rebuild and make my own order."

from Chapter 2: The breaking up of the accepted sculptural order, and the poetry of the figure in landscape, 1931-1934

"I took with me to show to Brancusi (and Arp, and Picasso the next day) photographs of my work and a book of drawings and studies from 1931, and *Profile* 1932. In both these carvings I had been seeking a free assembly of certain formal elements including space and calligraphy as well as weight and texture, and in the *Pierced Form* I had felt the most intense pleasure in piercing the stone in order to make an abstract form in space; quite a different sensation from that of doing it for the purpose of realism."

from Chapter 3: Constructive forms and poetic structure, 1934-1939

"When I started carving again in November 1934, my work seemed to have changed direction although the only fresh influence had been the arrival of the children. The work was more formal and all traces of naturalism had disappeared, and for some years I was absorbed in the relationships in space, in size and texture and weight, as well as in the tensions between the forms. This formality initiated the exploration with which I have been preoccupied continuously since then, and in which I hope to achieve some absolute essence in sculptural terms giving the quality of human relationships."

from Chapter 4: The war, Cornwall, and artist in landscape, 1939-1946

"In the late evenings, and during the night I did innumerable drawings in gouache and pencil - all of them abstract, and all them my own way of exploring the particular tensions and relationships of form and colour which were to occupy me in sculpture during the later years of the war. At that time I was reading very extensively and I became concerned as to the true relationship of the artist and society. I remember expecting the major upheaval of war to change my outlook; but it seemed as though the worse the international scene became the more determined and passionate became my desire to find a full expression of the ideas which had germinated before the war broke out, retaining freedom to do so whilst carrying out what was demanded of me as a human being. I do not think this preoccupation with abstract forms was escapism; I see it as a consolidation of faith in living values, and a completely logical way of expressing the intrinsic 'will to live' as opposed to the extrinsic disaster of the world war."

"From the sculptor's point of view one can either be the spectator of the object or the object itself. For a few years I became the object. I was the figure in the landscape and every sculpture contained to a greater or lesser degree the ever-changing forms and contours embodying my own response to a given position in that landscape. [...] There is no landscape without the human figure: it is impossible for me to contemplate pre-history in the abstract. Without the relationship of man and his land the mental image becomes a nightmare."

"I used colour and strings in many of the carvings of this time. The colour in the concavities plunged me into the depth of water, caves, or shadows deeper than the carved concavities themselves. The strings were the tension I felt between myself and the sea, the wind or the hills. The barbaric and magical countryside of rocky hills, fertile valleys, and dynamic coastline of West Penwith has provided me with a background and a soil which compare in strength with those of my childhood in the West Riding. Moreover it has supplied me with one of my greatest needs for carving a strong sunlight and a radiance from the sea which almost surrounds this bit of land, as well as a milder climate which enables me to carve out of doors nearly the whole year round."

from Chapter 5: Rhythm and space, 1946-1949

"Abstract drawing has always been for me a particularly exciting adventure. First there is only one's mood; then the surface takes one's mood in pencil and texture; then a line or curve which, made with a colour on the hard surface of many coats of oil or gouache, has a particular kind of 'bite' rather like incising on slate; then one is lost in a new world of a thousand possibilities because the next line in association with the first will have a compulsion about it which will carry one forward into a completely unknown territory. [...] The whole process is opposite to that of drawing from life."

"[...] in about the middle of 1947, a suggestion was made to me that I might watch an operation in a hospital. I expected that I should dislike it; but from the moment when I entered the operating theatre I became completely absorbed by two things: first, the extraordinary beauty of purpose and co-ordination between the human beings all dedicated to the saving of life, and the way that unity of idea and gesture dictated a perfection of concentration, movement, and purpose, and secondly by the way this special grace (grace of mind and body) induced a spontaneous space composition, an articulated and abstract kind of abstract sculpture very close to what I had been seeking in my own work."

"For two years I drew, not only in the operating theatres of hospitals, but from groups in my studio and groups observed around it. [...] I began to consider a group of separate figures as a single sculptural entity, and I started working on the idea of two or more figures as a unity, blended into one carved and rhythmic form."

from Chapter 6: Artist in society, 1949-1952

"But the most significant observation I made for my own work was that as soon as people, or groups of people, entered the Piazza [San Marco] they responded to the proportions of the architectural space. They walked differently, discovering their innate dignity. They grouped themselves in unconscious recognition of their importance in relation to each other as human beings."

"If human beings respond so decisively to mood and environment, and also to space and proportion in architecture, then it is possible to, and imperative that we should, rediscover those perceptions in ourselves, so that architecture and sculpture can in the future evoke those definite responses in human beings which grew with Venice and still live today. Sculpture should act not only as a foil to architectural properties but the sculpture itself should provide a link between human scale and sensibility and the greater volumes of space and mass in architecture."

"In opposition to 'social realism' I believe that findings in sculpture emerge more powerfully when they are carried through sculpture's own silent language; and that if the sculptor himself can find *personal* integration with his surroundings and his community his work will stand a greater chance of developing the poetry which is his free and affirmative contribution to society."

"So many ideas spring from an inside response to forms for example, if I see a woman carrying a child in her arms it is not for me to see that it affects me, but what I feel within my own body. There is an immediate transference of sensation, a response within to the rhythm of weight, balance and tension of the large and small form making an interior organic whole. The transmutation of experience is, therefore, organically controlled and contains new emphasis of forms. It may be that the sensation of being a woman presents yet another facet of the sculptural idea."

Extracts from Michael Shepherd, *Barbara Hepworth*, London, 1963

Artist's notes on Technique

"I rarely make a maquette. They are essential when working for an architect or a commission; but I always find that a good maquette, in the sense of being accurate, is an unpleasing object; whereas an exciting small sculpture is necessarily very different from the ultimate large one - but more stimulating."

"I have used bronze and other metals only in the last seven or eight years, and when working for bronze I build an armature and work direct in plaster of Paris which I prefer to clay, as it is possible to cut it and get a surface nearer to my personal sense of form. Certain forms, I find, re-occur during one's lifetime and I have found some considerable pleasure in re-interpreting forms, originally carved, and which in bronze, by greater attenuation, can give a new aspect to certain themes."

"I think power tools are very limited in their use. The mechanical drill is a great help in boring a hole towards which one can carve freely without breaking one's carving tools. The carbonium wheel also has its uses for certain inaccessible forms; but I regard them as strictly utilitarian and dislike very much any mechanical kind of surface, as I think the hand-work reveals the quality of thought right down to the final stages."

"I always envisage 'perfect settings' for sculpture and they are, of course, mostly envisaged outside and related to the landscape. Whenever I drive through the countryside and up the hills, I imagine forms placed in situations of natural beauty and I wish more could be done about the permanent siting of sculptures in strange and lonely places."

"I prefer my work to be shown outside. I think sculpture grows in the open light and with the movement of the sun its aspect is always changing; and with space and the sky above, it can expand and breathe. Wood sculptures, of course, are not happy out of doors; but they have other properties more tactile and intimate which relate to an indoor life."

Extracts from J.P. Hodin, *Barbara Hepworth*, London, 1961

'Two Conversations with Barbara Hepworth: 'Art and Life' and 'The Ethos of Sculpture', pp. 23-24

Art and Life (in conversation with J.P. Hodin, 18 August 1953)

"Art at the moment is thrilling. The work of the artist today springs from innate impulses towards life, towards growth - impulses whose rhythms and structures have to do with the power and insistence of life. [...] In the past, when sculpture was based on the human figure, we knew this structure well, but today we are concerned with structures in an infinite variety of more or less physical sense. Our thoughts can either lead us to life and continuity or [...] the way to annihilation. That is why it is so important that we find our complete sense of continuity backwards and forwards in this new world of forms and values. I see the present development in art as something opposed to any materialistic, anti-human or mechanistic direction of mind."

The Ethos of Sculpture (in conversation with J.P. Hodin, 28 August 1959)

"I do not think sculpture can come alive in architecture at all unless it is recognized as a value in its own right. Sculpture is not primarily an embellishment. It gives the human dimension, it gives that added perception which only sculpture can give. [...] Sculpture makes people act in a certain way; they move in a certain manner. Their gestures and their reaction to a sculpture are extremely expressive and this is the point - if the architect and the sculptor know how to sitze upon it - where one might achieve that vital development in the architect's work as in the sculptor's work in relation to human needs."

"What is the meaning of sculpture? Today when we are all conscious of the expanding universe, the forms experienced by the sculptor should express not only this consciousness but should, I feel, emphasize also the possibilities of new developments of the human spirit, so that it can affirm and continue life in its highest form. [...] It does not matter what philosophy or which religion is involved; the point is that we must be aware of this extension of our knowledge of the universe and must utilize it in the service of the continuity of the human spirit."

"Sculpture communicates an immediate sense of life - you can feel the pulse of it. It is perceived, above all by the sense of touch, which is our earliest sensation; and touch gives us a sense of living contact and security. [...] That has nothing to do with the question of perfection, or harmony, or purity, or escapism. It lies far deeper; it is the primitive instinct which allows man to live fully with all his perceptions active and alert, and in the calm acceptance of the balance of life and death. It is this insistence on elementary values, sculpture is perhaps more important today than before because life's continuity is threatened and this has given us a sense of unbalance."

Extracts from *Barbara Hepworth: Drawings from a Sculptor's Landscape*, London, 1968

"The wonderful structure of the human frame is an architecture of highest proportion, and all sensitivity to landscape is in one's ability to feel within one's body; to feel with a primitive humility a response to life and location, a response to form, texture and rhythm; and a response to the magic of light, both sun and moon ever-changing."

"I rarely draw what I see - I draw what I feel in my body. Sculpture is a three-dimensional projection of primitive feeling: touch, texture, size and scale, hardness and warmth, evocation and compulsion to move, live, and love. Landscape is embraced - it has bones and flesh and skin and hair. It has age and history and a principle behind its evolution."

"Whenever I am embraced by land and seascape I draw ideas for new sculptures: new forms to touch and walk round, new people to embrace, with an exactitude of form that those without sight can hold and realize. For me it is the same as the touch of a child in health, not in sickness. The feel of a loved person who is strong and fierce and not tired and bowed down. This is not an aesthetic doctrine, nor is it a mystical idea. It is essentially practical and passionate, and it is my whole life, as expressed in stone, marble, wood and bronze."

"A sculptor's landscape embraces all things that grow and live and are articulate in principle: the shape of the buds already formed in autumn, the thrust and fury of vigorous growth, the adjustment of trees and rocks and human beings to the fierceness of winter - all these belong to the sculptor's world, as well as the supreme perception of man, woman and child of this expanding universe. It is within our bodies to feel and to be, and in making a sculpture we do, in fact, make a tallman that enables him to enter our architecture and look at our painting as fully posed human beings."

"When I start drawing and painting abstract forms I am really exploring new forms, hollows, and tensions which will lead me where I need to go. Planes and curves are the pure rhythm of stance and energy. The pierced hole allows bodily entry and re-entry. The spiral takes hold of one's hand and arm. A figure can be a breast or a head or a shoulder. A hollow can be the taut hollow in the thigh. Springs can twist one from the front to the back, and colour establish the mood of place and time. Out of all these components I search for new associations of form and hollow and space, and a new clarity and awareness for the growth of new sculpture."

"Sculpture is, in the twentieth century, a wide field of experience, with many facets of symbol and material and individual calligraphy. But in all these varied and exciting extensions of our experience we always come back to the fact that we are human beings of flesh and skin, a size, biologically the same as primitive man, and that it is through drawing and observing, or observing and drawing that we equate our bodies with our landscape. A sculptor's landscape is one of ever-changing space and light where forms reveal themselves in new aspects as the sun rises and sets, and the moon comes up. It is a primitive world; but a world of infinite subtle meaning."

Extracts from 'Alan Bowness: conversations with Barbara Hepworth' in *The Complete Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth 1960-69*, edited by Alan Bowness, London, 1971

"[...] in a way carving is close to writing music - in so far as the composer takes in his whole work from beginning to end before he begins to write it down. Once you start it has its complete logic - it's an inevitable procedure."

[talking about the United Nations *Single Forum*]:

"It's the right scale for human beings to relate to. They've left behind enormous buildings, and now here's this vast facade of glass, but the sculpture is on the human scale. A person full of emotion can encompass it as part of their life. And when you look down on it from the 38th floor, it's like an old friend standing there below. I don't believe in heroic sculpture - I want to get the human relationship right. When I'm working the moment which concerns me most is first the perspective in relation to the height of the work, and then it's through drawing and observing - and then the movement which has to take place if you're going to look at it, and finally I like to try to give an emphasis of quietude and draw out what I hope is some poetry."

"[...] I built the bones first, and put on a lot of plaster with a spatula, and then began to carve the surface. You were very nervous at first, and it was a relief when it went to sand and you had something that you could feel. And then as usual I began to cut it down, and the more I cut the better it was. I used axes, rakes, hatchets - different kinds in a different rhythm. You can see the axe marks where I wanted the extra vitality."

"[This] is always added later. When I've made something, I think where did I get that idea from? And then I remember [...] But I don't start with a title: I make a shape, and there may or may not be an association with it - but this comes afterwards."

"They are bronze sculptures, and the material allows more openness of course. I was a comparative newcomer to bronze, so I used to work extravagantly to see how far I could go. It has a presence, but it doesn't look at you in the way that a carving does. There is a stronger sense of participating in the form - you want to go in and out as you look at a sculpture like *Tissa*, or *Purification*. Maybe it's not big enough to do this, but you don't need to be physically entangled if you've got a pair of hands."

[talking about a group of projects made in 1966]:

"It was the same in 1938. If war is imminent, or you're very ill or something's threatening, you want to put something down for big work while you can. I was in [a] absolute fever of ideas, without much hope of fulfilment. It's never easy for a sculptor to have enough money, enough space and enough material to do exactly what he wants to do. Maybe you have to wait. I couldn't make small works, but I wrote in my records, projects for moments. [...] Some of them have always been in my mind, and I think they're related to work I've done in the last decade."

"I don't feel so personally involved - I'm not exactly the sculptor in the landscape any more. I think of the works as objects which rise out of the land or the sea, mysteriously. You can't make a sculpture without it being a thing - a creature, a figure, a flesh. I called that marvellous piece of Irish black marble *Flaxstone*, and that is what sculpture is about. It's something you experience through your senses, but it's also a life-giving, purposeful force."

"In the wood carvings the interior gouging is all done by hand, and no mallet. I can cut half an inch deep. It has to be rhythmic - one's whole mind and body must be focused on it; otherwise the carving just changes character and direction. If I'm interrupted I have to start all over again. The thing is to get the flow of the lines all in one mood, then you can come out through the hole and join up where you want to."

"[Slate] is precious, and you can't hit it with a hammer. You use a saw, and it's rather hard work; you can use a gouge and mallet if you're careful, but it's mostly filing. You can do some fine chiselling, but only with very light-weight tools, it's possible to feather slate; you bore holes and drive in wood wedges and wet the wood. As it expands, it splits. You do the same thing with marble."

Extracts from Barbara Hepworth, *A Pictorial Autobiography*, Bath, 1971

"All my early memories are of forms and shapes and textures. Moving through and over the West Riding landscape with my father in his car, the hills were sculptures; the roads defined the form. Above all, there was the sensation of moving physically over the contours of fullness and concavities, through hollows and over peaks - feeling, touching, seeing, through mind and hand and eye. This sensation has never left me. I, the sculptor, am the landscape. I am the form and I am the hollow, the thrust and the contour."

[Based on her words in John Read's film on Hepworth of 1961]:

"I think this idea of working holidays was established in my mind very early indeed. My father took us each year to Robin Hood's Bay to stay in a house on the lovely beach. [...] here I laid out my paintings and general paraphernalia and crept out at dawn to collect stones, seaweeds and paint, and draw by myself before somebody organised me! This pattern was repeated in Norfolk, and later in Greece, and several times in the Isles of Scilly."

It made a firm foundation for my working life - and it formed my idea that a woman artist is not deprived by cooking and having children [...] - one is in fact nourished by this rich life, provided one always does some work each day, even a single half hour, so that images grow in one's mind."

"The sound of a mallet or hammer is music to my ears, when either is used rhythmically and I can tell by sound alone what is going on."

"The forms which have had special meaning for me since childhood have been the standing form (which is the translation of my feeling towards the human figure), the seated form, and that is what sculpture is, the tender relationship of one living thing beside another); and the closed form, such as the oval, spherical or pierced form (sometimes incorporating colour) which translates for me the association and meaning of gesture in landscape [...]"

"My hand is my thinking hand. The right is only a motor hand. This holds the hammer. The left hand, the thinking hand, must be relaxed, sensitive. The rhythms of thought pass through the fingers and grip of this hand into the stone."

It is also a listening hand. It listens for basic weaknesses or flaws in the stone; for the possibility of an unimpressive or fractured surface. [...] "I became more and more pre-occupied with the inside and outside of forms as I had been in the late 1930's, but on a bigger scale. I wanted to make forms to stand on hillsides and through which to look to the sea. Forms to lie down in, or forms to climb through."

For a comprehensive compilation of Hepworth's writings, both published and unpublished, together with selected interviews and broadcasts, see: Sophie Bowness (ed.), *Barbara Hepworth: Writings and Conversations*, London, 2015 (Tate Publishing)

By Barbara Hepworth

Quotations from Barbara Hepworth's Writings

about Barbara Hepworth

Alan Bowness: Life and work

Sophie Bowness: Barbara Hepworth and St Ives

Sophie Bowness: The late marble carvings of Barbara Hepworth