

# BARBARA HEPWORTH: artist in society 1948-53

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*Barbara Hepworth: artist in society 1948-53* focuses on a significant period in Hepworth's work after the Second World War, when she began to receive wide recognition and large-scale public commissions. A particular connection was formed between Hepworth and Hertfordshire in these years, which is a special focus of this exhibition. Hepworth was commissioned to make two major sculptures for the Festival of Britain, one of which, **Turning Forms**, came to St Albans when the Festival ended. It joined an earlier carving here, **Eocene**, as part of the pioneering Hertfordshire Schools Collection initiated by the County's Chief Education Officer, John Newsom. In addition, in 1951 Hepworth was commissioned to carve **Vertical Forms** for the new Hatfield Technical College (now the University of Hertfordshire).

Hepworth believed passionately that the artist had a role to play in society. The celebrated drawings she made in the operating theatres of hospitals express the complete harmony that exists between a group of people working together with a common purpose, as a metaphor for an ideal society. Hepworth also made many life drawings from models in her studio at this time. It was a particularly rich phase of drawing. The close relationship between her drawing, or painting, and her contemporary sculpture in this period is explored in the exhibition.

In Hepworth's work at the mid-point of her career, there is a sustained dialogue between abstraction and figuration. After a decade preoccupied with landscape, she returned to the human form in the later 1940s, and her work is characterised by a fascination with female/male dualities and their resolution through combination in a single form or in two related ones. Hepworth was excited by her discovery of this new theme. She described how her drawing from life and in operating theatres fed into her sculpture: '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. Many subsequent carvings were on this theme'. **Bicentric Form**, **Dyad** and **Eocene** are examples exhibited here. Each combines two figures as one. In **Contrapuntal Forms**, carved for the Festival of Britain and now at Harlow, two abstracted figures, male and female, are placed in close relation, forming a single harmonious unit.

The painter Patrick Heron wrote in 1950: 'in her new sculpture, the human form (a face in some; the whole figure in others) everywhere presses through the skin. In introducing the profiles of nose, lips, chin, forehead, or the engraved outline of a hand or eye, Barbara Hepworth is enhancing, not diluting, the quality and power of her own abstraction'.<sup>1</sup>

Hepworth moved between abstraction and figuration very naturally at this time. In 1948 she wrote to her friend the art critic Herbert Read: 'I don't feel any difference of intention or of mood when I paint (or carve) realistically or when I make abstract carvings. The two ways of working flow into each without effort. [They] enhance each other by giving an absolute freedom. Working realistically replenishes one's love for life, humanity and the earth. Working abstractly seems to release one's personality and sharpen the perceptions, so that in the observation of life it is the wholeness or inner intention which moves one so profoundly'.

## HEPWORTH AND HERTFORDSHIRE

The three Hepworth sculptures in Hertfordshire were acquired through the enlightened policy of the County Education Authority to display and commission contemporary works of art for its schools and colleges. From 1949 a small percentage of construction budgets for new schools were dedicated to works of art. The schools' art collection gave Hertfordshire children the opportunity to see original works of art, which they would not otherwise experience, in their daily lives.<sup>2</sup> The Chief Education Officer, John Newsom, was the guiding force behind the programme, which took inspiration from the work of Henry Morris as Education Officer for Cambridgeshire. Hepworth's mother and child carving, **Eocene** (1948-49), was bought in 1950 for St Albans Girls' Grammar School (now St Albans Girls' School). The special price reflected Hepworth's support for the policy. The new school building was completed in 1952 and officially opened in February 1953. Henry Moore's **Family Group** was sited in 1950 at the first secondary school to be opened under this scheme, Barclay School in Stevenage (built 1947-49). Many new schools were constructed after the 1944 Education Act, which introduced free secondary education up to the age of fifteen, and for Hertfordshire's expanding population. The new architecture and innovative practice of Hertfordshire's education department were widely praised.

**Vertical Forms** was commissioned in 1951 for the principal façade of the new Hatfield Technical College (now the University of Hertfordshire). It was the first large technical college to be constructed under the post-war programme.<sup>3</sup> The building had a pre-cast concrete frame with brick cladding in places, as shortages

of materials permitted. Its architect, Howard Robertson of the firm Easton & Robertson, invited Hepworth to undertake the work. He had recently commissioned her husband Ben Nicholson to paint two panels for the S.S. Rangitane of the New Zealand Shipping Company. Two paintings by Nicholson were also acquired under the terms of the architectural contract for the College, which allowed a small percentage of construction costs for art. Reg Butler's bronze sculpture **Oracle** and Trevor Tennant's stone relief panel based on the plan of the building were the other founding works of art at the College. Hepworth wrote to her friend the architect Leslie Martin of the commission: 'I have strong ideas about architecture incorporating sculpture. I don't like additions'.<sup>4</sup>

'I tried to express a quality of aspiration to learning. I call it **Vertical Forms**', Hepworth is reported as telling a journalist at the time of the opening of the College, which she attended on 16 December 1952.<sup>5</sup> The carving represents three standing, interlocking abstract figures. The related painting, **Three Figures – Project for Sculpture**, is likely to have been a presentation sketch to show the commissioners (she did not make preparatory drawings for her sculptures unless required to for a commission).

When **Vertical Forms** was nearing completion, Hepworth wrote to a friend: 'The relief is really good I think. The reason I seem to work so slowly is, I suppose, the effort I put in to get some perfection of feeling as well as line & form. It seems to be slower in relief work than in the round. The merest touch seems to matter'.<sup>6</sup> The Hopton Wood limestone quarried in Derbyshire that she used for the carving is shelly, porous and easily eroded by acid rain. Earlier this year the sculpture was removed from its original outdoor site in order to prevent further loss of carved detail and ensure its preservation for the future. The work was conserved prior to display in this exhibition and is to be re-sited inside the University. Its original smooth finish is now largely lost, as is the subtlety of its lines and contours, as can be seen in the early photographs in the studio and at Hatfield, shown in the archive display in the exhibition.

## COMMISSIONS FOR THE FESTIVAL OF BRITAIN

Hepworth received two monumental commissions for the Festival's principal site on London's South Bank. **Contrapuntal Forms** was sited near two of the iconic structures of the Festival, the Dome of Discovery and Skylon. It was commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain. This was her largest work to date, at ten foot in height. The limestone was quarried in Ireland (she had used the same Corrib limestone for **Bicentric Form**, shown in the exhibition). Each block weighed four tons. Hepworth took on permanent assistants for the first time in order to carry

out the commission. For a year, **Contrapuntal Forms** was at the centre of her life at her new studio, Trewyn Studio, in St Ives. Here she found ideal conditions, space and peace in which to work.

Hepworth's second Festival commission was **Turning Forms**, an abstract sculpture constructed in concrete, painted white, over a steel armature. It developed from the series of 'Sculptures with Colour' which she had begun in 1939. A highly innovative work, **Turning Forms** revolved on a rotating plate at one revolution every two minutes. Commissioned by the Festival Authorities, it was for the Riverside Restaurant, located between the Festival Hall and Waterloo Bridge and designed by the architect Jane Drew. Drew and Hepworth had long wanted to work together.

When the exhibition closed, the works of art were dispersed. The Arts Council gave **Contrapuntal Forms** to Harlow New Town in Essex, close to the border with Hertfordshire, designed by the architect Frederick Gibberd. (Like Hatfield, Harlow was one of the New Towns established under the 1946 New Towns Act.) The sculpture was sited in November 1951 in a housing estate, Glebelands, which was intended to be a temporary location until the Civic Square was ready; however, it remains at the Glebelands estate, little visited.

In May 1952 Hepworth suggested that the Arts Council's Director of Art, Philip James, should contact John Newsom about a new site for **Turning Forms**. The first plan, for it to go to Manchester Education Authority, had fallen through. Newsom agreed immediately to take the sculpture and it was sited at St Julian's School in St Albans (now Marlborough Science Academy) at the end of June, where it can still be seen. It has never revolved at the school as it had done during the Festival.

## MATERIALS, TITLES, THEMES

The exhibition includes sculptures in a range of materials: three types of limestone – Blue Corrib, Hopton Wood and Portland – white marble (seravezza from Italy), and wood (rosewood, mahogany and beechwood). It shows the diversity of Hepworth's work at mid-career. 'Work work & more work is all I want', Hepworth wrote to Ben Nicholson in the autumn of 1948.<sup>7</sup>

Hepworth chose her titles with great care. She enjoyed finding the right words and would consult dictionaries to help her, writing to a friend: 'I know the feeling & intention of each carving but the exact words are elusive & also I'm fussy about names & words generally'.<sup>8</sup> She owned a copy of *Jarrolds' Dictionary of Difficult*

*Words* (1948 edition). In the second half of the 1940s she used Greek titles, such as **Eocene**, **Dyad** and **Perianth**.<sup>9</sup> Many of her titles in the period of the exhibition describe dualities, for example **Bicentric Form**, **Dyad**, **Bimorphic Form** and **Two Heads (Janus)**.

The standing form is a theme that runs through this exhibition, from the standing models in Hepworth's studio, to surgeons and nurses at work, carved figures and half-figures, single forms and monoliths. This theme had special meaning for her.

Hepworth's sculpture tends to fall into distinct periods of work on specific themes. The sculptures of 1948-53 are a case in point. After the restrictions of the war and its aftermath, she was at last able to work on a large scale and extend the standing form motif towards a double idea. The Venice-inspired **Group** series of 1951-52 (including **Group III (Evocation)** exhibited here) anticipates the many multi-part sculptures of her later years. Hepworth would move next to create the remarkable abstract guarea wood carvings of the mid 1950s.

This exhibition reunites sculptures and drawings that have not been seen together since they were made and brings new light to an important body of work.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'The Return of the Image', *The New Statesman*, 18 February 1950.  
<sup>2</sup> John Newsom quoted in *The Hertfordshire Advertiser*, 17 July 1953. On Newsom, see David Parker, *John Newsom: A Hertfordshire Educationist*, Hatfield, 2005. Newsom owned an abstract gouache of 1946 by Hepworth, **Green Caves**, and a drawing of a hospital theatre sister.  
<sup>3</sup> *Architectural Review*, London, February 1953.  
<sup>4</sup> Letter of 5 April 1951 (Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art archive).  
<sup>5</sup> *The Star*, London, 20 December 1952.  
<sup>6</sup> Letter to Norman Capener, 9 August 1951.  
<sup>7</sup> Tate Archive, TGA 8717/1/1/334.  
<sup>8</sup> Letter to E.H. Ramsden, undated [1943], Tate Archive.  
<sup>9</sup> Others are **Dryad** (BH 132); **Pelagos** (BH 133), **Anthos** (BH 136), **Hamadryad** (BH 137), **Eos** (141), **Eidos** (BH 146), **Helikon** (BH 148).  
<sup>10</sup> A rich documentation of the period, taken from Hepworth's own collection, can be seen in the archive display in the exhibition.

CHRONOLOGY 1948-53

1948

- Hepworth draws operations in hospitals in Exeter and London (1947-49)
- *New Paintings by Barbara Hepworth* at the Lefevre Gallery, London, with L.S. Lowry (April)
- Shows in *Open Air Exhibition of Sculpture* in Battersea Park, London (London County Council in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain) (May-September)

1949

- Founder member of the Penwith Society of Arts in St Ives
- Acquires Trewyn Studio in St Ives in September, where she also lives permanently from December 1950 until her death in 1975 (now the Barbara Hepworth Museum and Sculpture Garden)
- Takes on permanent assistants for the first time (Denis Mitchell, John Wells and Terry Frost)
- First one-person exhibition in New York, at Durlacher Bros. (October)

1950

- Exhibition at Lefevre Gallery, London (February-March)
- British Council acquires its first work by Hepworth, **Rhythmic Form**, 1949 (February)
- Tate Gallery acquires its first Hepworth, **Bicentric Form**, 1949 (March)
- David Lewis begins to work as Hepworth's secretary. He writes and broadcasts on her work, as well as cataloguing it for her
- Represents Britain at the XXV Venice Biennale. Visits Venice in June for the opening
- Living permanently at Trewyn Studio (from December)

1951

- Designs sets and costumes for Sophocles' **Electra**, Old Vic Theatre, London, directed by Michel Saint-Denis (March)
- The Festival of Britain takes place. Two works by Hepworth are sited on the South Bank, her first public commissions: **Contrapuntal Forms**, commissioned by the Arts Council; and **Turning Forms**, commissioned by the Festival Authorities, at the Riverside Restaurant designed by the architect Jane Drew (May-September)
- Second Open Air Sculpture exhibition, Battersea Park, London (May-September)

- Retrospective at Wakefield City Art Gallery, travelling to York and Manchester (May-October)
- **Vertical Forms** commissioned for Hatfield Technical College
- Marriage to Ben Nicholson is dissolved. They continue to be the best critic of each other's work

1952

- Exhibition at Lefevre Gallery, London (October)
- Publication of first major monograph, with an introduction by Herbert Read and texts by the artist, *Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings*
- Attends opening of Hatfield Technical College and unveiling of **Vertical Forms** (December)

1953

- *International Sculpture Competition: The Unknown Political Prisoner*, organised by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA); awarded a second prize
- Death of Hepworth's son Paul Skeaping on active service with the RAF in Thailand (February)
- **Monolith (Empyrean)**, 1953-54, carved as a memorial to Paul and his navigator (sited outside the Festival Hall in 1954; at Kenwood House since 1961)
- St Ives Festival, directed by Hepworth and the composers Michael Tippett and Priaux Rainier (June)
- *Figures in a Landscape: Cornwall and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth*, colour film directed by Dudley Shaw Ashton for the British Film Institute
- *Sculpture of the Twentieth Century* exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, includes **The Cosdon Head** in the newly-opened sculpture garden, the first in America designed for modern sculpture
- Second Middelheimpark Sculpture Biennale, Antwerp, includes Hepworth

There were many firsts for Hepworth in this period – the first important monograph was published, the first film was made on her work, she created her first theatre designs, showed in open air sculpture exhibitions, took on public commissions. She also employed her first permanent assistants, saw her work enter the national collection and had her first solo New York show. It was a measure of her increasing reputation that Hepworth began to subscribe to a press agency in late 1951.

The exhibition is curated by Dr. Sophie Bowness, Barbara Hepworth Estate, and Annabel Lucas, Head of UHArts, University of Hertfordshire

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