

The Washington Times

October 20, 2001

Edition: 2

Section: D

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ART

Page: D1

Reclining vitality of sculptor's works

Author: *Joanna Shaw-Eagle; THE WASHINGTON TIMES*

Article Text:

Henry Moore was the first postmodern sculptor. He scoured the world for ideas. When Mr. Moore came to London in 1921 to study, he found that "world" at the British Museum.

The sculptor (1898-1986) discovered Egyptian, Greek, Aztec, Oceanic and African sculpture there. He visited twice weekly in the 1920s to sketch. Mr. Moore was determined to shake off the constraints of his neoclassic art training.

He imbued his work with what he called the "tense stillness" of Egyptian art, "concentrated energy" of the Greeks, "massive weightiness" of Aztec sculpture, "sense of life force" in the art of the Austral Islands and "unified visions" of African art.

Visitors will see these influences - and borrowings from modernists Jean Arp, Constantin Brancusi and Pablo Picasso - in the exhibition "Henry Moore," opening tomorrow at the National Gallery of Art. The show of about 165 items emphasizes his early sculpture and his works on paper.

The exhibition is the first U.S. retrospective in 20 years to assess Mr. Moore's contributions to sculpture of the last century. The Dallas Museum of Art organized "Moore" in cooperation with the Henry Moore Foundation.

Stylistic appropriations like Mr. Moore's are common in our times. Today's postmodernists and pluralists could not do without them. What is remarkable is the way Mr. Moore distills the powerful expressions from different peoples and aesthetics for what he called his "universal shapes."

These include his two major themes of the reclining woman and mother-and-child. But it is the feeling of growth, of aliveness - what he calls "vitality" - that becomes the crux of the universal shapes and his art. The philosopher Carl Jung would have called them "archetypes."

Consider Mr. Moore's fascination with recumbent figures and their source in the pre-Columbian god Chacmool. The god illustrated in the hefty exhibit catalog is typical of Toltec temple sculpture circa A.D. 1000 to 1200. It is an uncomfortably positioned man, half sitting, half reclining, with his head turned 90 degrees to one side. He holds a receptacle on his midsection to receive offerings - usually still-throbbing hearts from recently sacrificed owners.

Mr. Moore probably first saw a Mr. Moore probably first saw a Chacmool during his 1922 trip to Paris. Later, he saw the Chacmool reclining figure in the Museo Nacional de Antropologia in Mexico City.

"It was undoubtedly the one sculpture that most influenced my early work," he told Alan Wilkinson, author of one of the catalog essays.

The Chacmool form became for Mr. Moore the springboard for highly varied images of reclining figures, both male and female. Sculpted recumbent human forms appear in every size, scale, shape and material throughout the exhibit. At first, they remain close to their Mexican springboard, as with the bronze "Reclining Woman" (1930).

Mr. Moore became interested in abstraction and surrealism in the 1930s, as shown in images of stylized, stringed reclining women. He carried the transformed Chacmool image further in superb mixed-media (pen and ink, brush and ink, watercolor, wash and gouache on a cream-colored heavyweight paper), as in the extraordinarily free "Seated and Reclining Figures" (1931).

He further extended recumbent images in powerful drawings made during World War II. Materials were scarce, and he turned to delineating the conflict's devastating effects. The heavily textured "Tube Shelter Perspective" (1941) shows row upon row of bodies. Are these people alive or dead?

Mr. Moore moved north in 1941 to the small town of Much Hadham when the Germans bombed his studio in Hampstead. His only child, Mary, was born there in 1946, and Mr. Moore did a sculpted series on family life.

One was the poetic but large bronze "Family Group" (1948-49). It recalls the Egyptian sculpture he had admired many years before in the British Museum. He tried to infuse what he called "the Egyptian monumentality of vision, grandeur and permanence" into the family images.

The sculptor achieved an international reputation after World War II. New York City's Museum of Modern Art honored him with his first important retrospective in 1946. The 24th Venice Biennale awarded him the International Prize for Sculpture in 1948.

Mr. Moore, a miner's son in industrial Yorkshire, had known he wanted to be an artist but first served in World War I. He was gassed and taught bayonet skills when he returned home.

The sculptor won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Arts in London, then a bastion of conservative academic styles. Because he was a scholarship student from a working-class background, life was difficult for him at first.

Many years later Mr. Moore cast costly, large-scale bronze sculptures such as "Knife Edge Mirror Two Piece" (1976-78). He had dreamed of achieving this since the early 1930s. I.M. Pei, architect for the

then-new East Building of the National Gallery, commissioned the mammoth unique bronze for the front of the structure.

As in this work the single figures became biomorphic forms. Although abstract, they refer strongly to humans and nature's processes. "Knife Edge," like many of Mr. Moore's monumental bronzes of the period, takes on the organic vitality of his earlier universal shapes.

Mr. Moore set "Knife Edge" near the East Building's plaza. Mr. Pei's geometric rectilinear structure could easily overwhelm a weaker sculpture. But the two complement each other. They show that the growth of biomorphic forms enhances the purity of geometric proportions. It is a wonderful combination, and Washingtonians are fortunate to have it - even when the show departs.

***** WHAT: "Henry Moore"

WHERE: East Building of the National Gallery of Art, Fourth Street at Constitution Avenue NW

WHEN: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays and 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sundays, through Jan. 27

TICKETS: Free

PHONE: 202/737-4215

SPONSOR: **Catherine B. Reynolds Foundation**

Caption:

Photos (A, color), A) "Reclining Figure" (1931) is featured in the "Henry Moore" exhibit; B&C) "Tube Shelter Perspective" and "Reclining Figure" (left) are among the works featured in the "Henry Moore" exhibit at the National Gallery of Art. The show is the first U.S. retrospective in 20 years to assess Mr. Moore's contributions to sculpture of the last century.

Copyright 2001 News World Communications, Inc.

Record Number: U00728260013