

**BARBARA
HEPWORTH
DIVIDED
CIRCLE**

**THE HEONG GALLERY
AT DOWNING COLLEGE**

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In 1933 Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson visited the studios of Constantin Brancusi and Jean (Hans) Arp in Paris. While Hepworth admired the 'timeless elements' of Brancusi's sculpture, she was initially disappointed that in Arp's studio, 'All the sculptures appeared to be in plaster, dead white, except for some early reliefs in wood painted white with sharp accents of black.'¹ She continued, 'Plaster is a material which I have always particularly disliked because of the absence of tactile pleasure and light-carrying particles—a dead material excluding all the magical and sensuous qualities of the sculptural idea.'²

In addition to financial restraints and disruptions caused by the Second World War, Hepworth's continuing adherence to the belief that direct carving in marble or stone was superior to modelling in clay, from which a plaster cast was made before casting in bronze, prevented her from working on a scale suitable for public sculpture, although there had been exceptions (such as *Monumental Stele* carved in blue Ancaster stone in 1936, now destroyed). It was not until she received the commission for the Festival of Britain to make *Contrapuntal Forms* (1950–1) that she had the opportunity to work with two massive blocks of stone, each of which weighed four tonnes. It must have been apparent to her that strict adherence to carving as her primary means of expression would not enable her to participate in a meaningful way in the new emphasis on public sculpture that emerged in the 1950s.

1. 'Statements by Hepworth in six autobiographical sections' in *Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings*, with an introduction by Herbert Read, London, 1952, collected in Sophie Bowness (ed.), *Barbara Hepworth: Writings and Conversations* (Tate Publishing, 2015), p. 62.
2. Ibid.

In a talk for the British Council on 8 December 1961 Hepworth noted, 'It took nearly thirty years to reach the point where I felt free to work in metal. I am basically and primarily a carver and the properties of stone

and wood and marble have obsessed me all my life.³ An idiosyncratic working method that she evolved in 1956 with the sculpture *Curved Form (Trevalgan)* (see p. 30, fig. 2) greatly facilitated the creation of large-scale works in the years to come. Using expanded aluminium (a kind of tight mesh) as armature and eliminating the use of clay as the medium to be manipulated by the artist, she applied thick layers of plaster directly to the metal grid, carving into it once it had dried. Rather than the laborious and slow revelation of a form required by carving, this new method permitted much greater flexibility, vividly apparent in the monumental bronze *Meridian*, commissioned for State House, High Holborn in London in 1958 (see p. 30, fig. 3).

Speaking of her subsequent use of this technique with Alan Bowness, Hepworth said, 'It came after a period of doing both drawings and small sculptures of growing forms and interweaving forms. These came about, quite naturally, after I had started using bronze for the first time.'⁴ In response to Bowness's comment on the many different kinds of material she had used, she replied:

Yes, they are all materials that I like, but my working methods are sometimes not so different. My approach to bronze isn't a modeller's approach. I like to create the armature of a bronze as if I'm building a boat, and then putting the plaster on is like covering the bones with skin and muscles. But I build it up so that I can cut it. I like to carve the hard plaster surface. Even at the very last minute when it's finished I take a hatchet to it.⁵

The new spontaneity in her approach is readily apparent from the recollection of her assistant Brian Wall that she made the initial idea for *Meridian* from pipe cleaners dipped in plaster.⁶

During the 1960s Hepworth's commitment to carving did not diminish but, for the first time in her oeuvre, many of her most ambitious works were made in bronze or, to a lesser degree, other metals.⁷ Between 1961 and 1964 she completed two major commissions, both of which were based on earlier sculptural ideas: first, an aluminium *Winged Figure* (1961–2) for the John Lewis Partnership's flagship store on Oxford Street, and then a bronze *Single Form* (1961–4) for the United Nations Plaza in New York, which was dedicated to the memory of its late Secretary-General and Hepworth's friend, Dag Hammarskjöld. With her large-scale bronze *Squares with Two Circles* (1963), of which four casts were made, these show the wide range of Hepworth's formal language and sculptural technique during these few years.

3. 'The Sculptor Speaks', recorded talk for the British Council, 8 December 1961. *Writings and Conversations*, op. cit., p.153.

4. Alan Bowness (ed.), *The Complete Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth 1960–69* (Lund Humphries, 1971), p. 7.

5. Ibid.

6. Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens, *Barbara Hepworth: Works in the Tate Collection and the Barbara Hepworth Museum St Ives* (Tate Gallery, 1999), p.182.

7. Roughly one quarter of the works listed in the catalogue raisonné for 1960–69 are bronzes.

8. Text on *Winged Figure*, 1961–3, aluminium, BH 315, 4 July 1963, unpublished typescript. *Writings and Conversations*, op. cit., p.172.



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Winged Figure (fig.1), fabricated from aluminium with stainless steel rods, is representative of the way in which Hepworth was able to transform stylistic characteristics that she had absorbed during the 1930s, particularly from her discussions with the constructivist sculptor Naum Gabo, whom she met in 1935. Both shared an interest in mathematical models, although in the case of Hepworth this served to enrich rather than supersede her identification with natural forms and organic materials. From 1955 to 1957 Gabo had worked on a monumental sculpture in steel covered with bronze outside the De Bijenkorf department store in Rotterdam. Its symmetry and complexity contrast with the lightness and elusiveness of Hepworth's form. For this commission she said that she wished to capture

the greatest variety of light and shadow, from morning sun, afternoon reflected light and night floodlighting, so that visually the sculpture never remained static. The use of the apertures and stainless steel rods enabled me to get a constant 'variation' of the 'Winged Figure' by ever changing light and shade.⁸

She continued by reflecting on its position on the side of the building, 13 feet above the bustling shopping street:

The slant of this great wall, tipped slightly towards Oxford Street and Marble Arch was a great help to me. It allowed my imagination to develop freely my idea of the forms of air, wind, sea and space



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of Cornwall (where I live) and let this sculpture alight in Oxford Street where it still looks free enough to fly straight up to Marble Arch and home again!⁹

In 1961, the year before Hepworth's *Winged Figure* was complete, Arp, whose forms Hepworth had found disappointing almost thirty years earlier, created his own *Winged Being* from plaster (fig. 2). Although Arp (1886–1966) was seventeen years older than Hepworth (1903–75), their careers as sculptors ran almost parallel to each other. Arp had been a founder of the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916 but had only turned to sculpture in the round in 1930, a few years before Hepworth's visit. But while Hepworth tended to have a clear idea of what the finished sculpture would look like before beginning to work on a block of stone, Arp relied primarily on chance, an inheritance from his early days in Zurich. Surrounded by sculptures in his studio, a fragment of an earlier work often served as inspiration for a new sculpture. Adding plaster to a pre-existing form, Arp would modify it with successively fine layers of abrasives until he achieved the smooth, sensuous surfaces he favoured. Much of the appeal of Arp's sculptures, *Winged Being* among them, depends on unexpected protrusions and ambiguity of reference, the antithesis of Hepworth's approach.

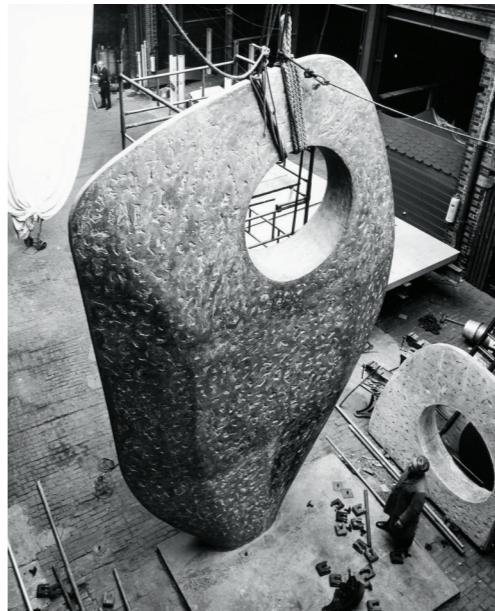
Hepworth's next major work, the United Nations *Single Form* (1961–4, figs 3 and 4) is almost as far removed from her own *Winged Figure* as is Arp's form. Although similar in scale to the work installed on Oxford Street that floats above spectators below, *Single Form* is firmly attached to the ground by its narrow base. From a distance, its irregular shape gives no hint of its volume. Instead, one is faced with a circular opening piercing the upper left section and a 'body' marked by three straight lines—two horizontal, one vertical and slightly diagonal—inherited from the making process. As the spectator walks around the memorial, however, it becomes apparent that it has a soft swelling contour that, according to Hepworth, was able to accommodate nine men inside it during the process of construction at the foundry.¹⁰

Hepworth first met Dag Hammarskjöld in London in April 1958. Hammarskjöld was an admirer of Hepworth's work, owning two key pieces: a sandalwood *Single Form* (1937–8) and a more recent work in lignum vitae wood, *Hollow Form (Churinga III)* (1960). She had already been working on several smaller sculptures similar in shape to the final memorial: *Single Form (Chûn Quoit)* and a version in walnut which she titled *Single Form (September)* (fig. 5), both from 1961, when she first heard of Hammarskjöld's death in an air crash on 18 September that year. Not unusual for Hepworth's work, closely related forms could be given titles that reveal different associations,

9. Ibid.

10. *The Complete Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth 1960–69*, op. cit., p.11.

in this particular case ranging from a Neolithic quoit in West Cornwall to the unexpected death of a much-admired friend. A parallel may be drawn between the spiritual and emotional identification with landscape that was the source of many of Hepworth's sculptures and her intuitive response to Dag Hammarskjöld's personality and achievements in the creation of *Single Form*. There is a message inside the circular hole in the memorial that reads 'To the glory of God and Dag Hammarskjöld'.



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While *Single Form* is characterised by gentle curves and a ship-like swell, and benefits from a network of associations both pastoral and personal, *Square Forms with Circles* (1963) and *Squares with Two Circles* (1963, fig. 6) announce the re-emergence of geometrical forms which had for



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Fig. 3 *Single Form* at the foundry, April 1964.

Fig. 4 *Single Form* outside the United Nations headquarters in New York, 1964.

Fig. 5 *Single Form (September)*, 1961. Walnut, 825 × 508 × 57 mm. Tate.

the most part remained latent since the 1930s, when Hepworth was a crucial presence in the international dialogues concerning abstraction and constructivism. Completing the group of abstract sculptures is *Four-Square (Walk Through)* (1966, fig. 7) which invites the spectator to investigate its structure by walking through it. Although seemingly more severe and architectonic, close inspection of the surface and details of the separate elements reveals that they have been constructed in the same manner as Hepworth's more organic bronzes, by applying plaster to expanded aluminium which is then carved and cast in bronze. They were not manufactured mechanically, and their variety of form, texture and colour within both series and individual casts are especially revealed when displayed in natural settings, including Hepworth's garden in St Ives.



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Although she was increasingly recognised as one of the major sculptors of her generation during the 1960s, Hepworth's adherence to sculptural values that she had been refining since the 1920s placed her at the opposite end of the spectrum from many of her contemporaries and most of the younger generation. Particularly for newly emerging artists, carving and bronze casting were rejected as characteristic of sculpture from the past. At a time when Hepworth's recent production included such perfectly realised carvings as *Two Figures (Menhirs)* (1964, fig. 8), carved in slate and characterised by, in Hepworth's words, 'the most gorgeous fossil of a fern' – and *Horizontal Form* (1968, fig. 9) carved in lignum vitae with its distinctive grain – the influential critic and theorist

Fig. 6 *Squares with Two Circles*, 1963 (cast 1 of 3). Bronze, 3061 × 1372 × 318 mm. Tate.

Photographed at the Tate Gallery.

Fig. 7 *Four-Square (Walk Through)*, 1966 (cast 0 of 3). Bronze, 4290 × 1990 × 2295 mm. Tate.

Rosalind Krauss condemned Arp and Henry Moore, as well as their colleagues and champions, for their 'religiosity about stone, wood and the essential forms lying nascent within their materials.'¹¹ American sculptor David Smith (1906–65), whose *Cubi XXVIII* (1965, fig. 10) dates from the year of his untimely death, differed from Hepworth in all respects and it was only near the end of his life that he changed his attitude to the display of his sculpture in natural settings. In answer to the question, 'How do you feel about materials?' in 1962, Smith responded, 'I don't particularly want the material to show. Now steel, that's a natural thing for me. I buy it in flat planes – that's the way I use it. After Cubism, who cares about form? It's planes.'¹² 'Rarely the Grand Conception,' he declared on another occasion, his working process was 'a preoccupation with parts. I start with one part, then a unit of parts, until a whole appears.'¹³



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Towards the end of Hepworth's life, the publication of her *Pictorial Autobiography* in 1970 and the following year *The Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth 1960–69*, edited by Alan Bowness, established a clear record of her life and recent sculpture. Perfectionist that she was, she remained rigorous in her selection of woods and different kinds of stones to be carved, and exacting in their execution. Bronzes were always returned to the studio from the foundry and often worked on in the studio until she was satisfied. Consequently, it is no surprise that she was firmly opposed to having posthumous casts made of her work and to finishing incomplete editions after her death. This contrasts with the situation following the death of Arp in 1966, when production in the studio continued, bronzes were cast, enlargements made, and stone figures commissioned. In 2012 Arie Hartog estimated that the sculptural oeuvre of Arp had more than doubled since his death, a situation that has resulted in many controversies and disputes.¹⁴ In contrast, Hepworth's oeuvre is as she left it, above the fray as she had been in the last years



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of her life and in line with her vision of making

11. *The Complete Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth 1960–69*, op. cit., p. 8; Rosalind E. Krauss, *Terminal Iron Works: The Sculpture of David Smith* (MIT Press, 1971), p. 62.

12. 'David Smith: An Interview with Katherine Kuh', *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (Harper & Row, 1962).

13. David Smith, 'Notes on My Work', *Arts Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 5, February 1960.

Fig. 8 *Two Figures (Menhirs)*, 1964. Slate on wooden base, 825 × 638 × 320 mm. Tate.

Fig. 9 *Horizontal Form*, 1968. Lignum vitae, length 480 mm. Private collection.

Fig. 10 David Smith, *Cubi XXVIII*, 1965. Stainless steel, 2743 × 2794 × 1143 mm. The Eli and Edythe L. Broad Collection.

a work which could transport the whole of this environment of the world in its absolute beauty, unspoiled beauty, and place it, say, in the middle of Piccadilly and create the exact evocation of idea so that everything becomes quite stilled and controls the impetus, which I think we suffer from, of rushing and confusion, and create an exact response.¹⁵

14. Arie Hartog and Kai Fischer (eds),
Hans Arp: Sculptures, A Critical Survey
(Hatje Cantz, 2012), p. 37.
15. 'Barbara Hepworth' in Warren
Forma, *5 British Sculptors (Work and
Talk)* (Grossman, 1964). Interview/
statement recorded in St. Ives
in July 1963. *Writings and
Conversations*, op. cit., p.175.

Barbara Hepworth: Divided Circle

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Dr John L Tancock received his M.A. from Downing College in 1967 and his Ph.D. from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 1977 for his thesis 'The Sculpture of Auguste Rodin'. In recent years he has focused on contemporary Chinese art. He co-curated *Duchamp and/or/in China* for Ullens Center of Contemporary Art, Beijing (2013) and curated the Heong Gallery's second exhibition *Ai Weiwei: Cubes and Trees* (2016). He is co-author of *Ai Weiwei: Beijing Photographs 1993–2003* (MIT Press, 2018).