Moore, Henry Spencer (1898 – 1986)

For British critics such as Peter Fuller, Henry Moore’s work belongs within the longer-established national tradition of Romanticism, rather than the international contexts of modernism. Yet though the term’s exact application is a matter of complex critical debate, modernism remains an enduringly useful way of understanding Moore’s long and enormously influential career. Moore made regular visits to the British Museum, later admitting that ‘early Mexican carving formed my views of carving as much as anything I could do.’ Dorothy Kosinski has suggested that for this young, working-class artist, the combination of modernism and non-Western art forms ‘implied freedom from the demands and structures of the academic tradition of classical and Renaissance art.'

Moore’s father was a miner who had worked his way up to the rank of pit deputy through self-education. On his insistence Moore initially trained as a schoolteacher, but, after service in the Great War, received an ex-serviceman’s grant to study first at Leeds College of Art, where a sculpture department was set up for him, and then a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, London. There, he read Roger Fry’s influential essay collection *Vision and Design* (1920), an emancipating, viewer-oriented approach to art which advocated a close study of form across artistic epochs.

In 1922 Moore visited Paris, the avant-garde capital of the world, to see Cézanne’s work first hand; he would continue to visit twice a year during the inter-war period. Sir William Rothenstein, the principal of the Royal College, and a mentor in the way his school art teacher Alice Gostick had been, gave Moore his first teaching job in 1924, and the security to begin making an impact on the London art scene.

Moore’s first one-man exhibition at the Warren Gallery in 1928 was a success, with the purchase of work bringing the important financial and moral support of artists of the previous generation such as Jacob Epstein. Though Moore had still been struggling to resolve the contradictions between his diverse interests, a degree of resolution came with the brown Hornton stone *Reclining Figure* 1929; a modern take on a classic theme into which has variously been read the influence of Picasso’s 1918-23 period and the Mexican Chac-mool figure. For the critic Charles Harrison, this work was ‘Moore’s major contribution to the development of that moderate and vernacular modernism which characterizes the more advanced English sculpture of 1920s’ and reaches its most advanced development in his work – and that of his contemporary Barbara Hepworth – in the 1930s. Both were members of the Seven & Five Society and, later, Unit One. These were two avant-garde artists’ groups which fostered variants of modernism with a British, or as Harrison puts it, ‘vernacular’ identity.

The 1930s were a period of consolidation in this respect; Tate Britain’s 2010 Moore show featured a section titled ‘Modernism’ consisting entirely of works dated 1931 – 1940. As his prominence increased, attacks from sections of the press – particularly the *Morning Post –* resulted in tensions at the Royal College. In 1931, he resigned to establish a sculpture department at, what was then, the Chelsea Polytechnic. This was also the year of his second one-man show, at the Leicester Galleries; Epstein wrote ‘Before these works I ponder in silence … For the future of sculpture in England, Henry Moore is vitally important’ and *The Morning Post* wrote ‘The cult of ugliness triumphs at the hands of Mr Moore’.

Jennifer Mundy has suggested that if the early 1930s saw British culture work through its provincialism towards something like modernism, the slide towards war at the end of the decade, encouraged ‘artists and critics to rethink their modernism in more domestic and ultimately “patriotic” terms.’ By 1939, Moore’s work had been accepted into the Tate collection and, during the war, he produced sketches – from memory – of civilians sheltering in the London Underground which were exhibited in the National Gallery, allowing a broad public to feel a connection with his work. His 1944 *Mother and Child* for St Matthew’s Church, Northampton, however, was met with controversy and acclaim alike.

At the 1948 Venice Biennale – the first since the war – Moore won the International Sculpture Prize, and private and public organisations such as the British Council began to promote Moore’s work around the world. Moore’s early work had been produced according to a doctrine of ‘truth to material’ which emphasised the sanctity of the sculptor’s relationship to the stone he was directly carving. Kosinski argues that, later, he attempted to ‘free himself from the straitjacket of modernist ideology’. In 1951 Moore admitted it could become a ‘fetish’; he turned instead toward a public scale and toward bronze casting, using a team of assistants.

A later generation of modernists were uncomfortable with Moore’s attachment to the past; in 1947, the American formalist critic Clement Greenberg dismissed him as ‘a sincere academic modern’. Even advocates such as David Sylvester admitted that his work lacked ‘wit’, and this sincerity made it unfashionable in the era of postmodernism. Artists such as Bruce McLean and Bruce Nauman, however, used precisely this form of wit to affirm the enduring importance of his achievement.The 244cm-high bronze *Mother and Child: Block Seat* (1983–84) is an example of how the better of his larger, later works could maintain the intimate concern with tactile human experience from the earliest carvings.

**References and further reading**

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Suggested images:

[1929 Brown Hornton Stone Reclining Figure](http://www.henry-moore.org/works-in-public/world/uk/leeds/leeds-art-gallery/reclining-figure-1929-lh-59):

<http://www.henry-moore.org/works-in-public/world/uk/leeds/leeds-art-gallery/reclining-figure-1929-lh-59>

[Mother & Child Block Seat 1983-4](http://www.henry-moore.org/works-in-public/world/japan/hakone/open-air-museum/mother-and-child-block-seat-1983-84-lh-838):

<http://www.henry-moore.org/works-in-public/world/japan/hakone/open-air-museum/mother-and-child-block-seat-1983-84-lh-838>

Elliot and Fry portrait of Henry Moore: <http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw102249/Henry-Moore?LinkID=mp03151&wPage=1&role=sit&rNo=39>