Grace Brockington

Gaudier-Brzeska, Henri (1891–1915)

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska had a catalytic effect on the development of modernist sculpture in Britain. He was born in France, in St Jean-de-Braye, near Orleans, but moved to London in 1911, where he made his most significant work. At the outbreak of the First World War he enlisted in the French army and was killed in action on 5 June 1915 at the age of 23. His career, so brief and prolific and so tragically cut short, has become emblematic of the flowering of modernism in Britain shortly before the war. As an artist he was self-taught, taking his inspiration from a number of sources: museum collections in Paris and London, Rodin and other European modernists, and non-European artefacts. Amongst avant-garde groups, he associated most closely with the Vorticists, signing their manifesto in 1914, and contributing articles to their magazine *Blast* (1914 and 1915). However, he also worked across the factions of the London art world, and his practice was eclectic, using whatever material came to hand and combining the virile negrophilia of *Red Stone Dancer* with the naturalistic figuration of *Maternity* (both 1913).

Gaudier-Brzeska was a self-conscious modernist who claimed a place amongst the European avant-garde. His check-list of ‘WE the moderns’ in *Blast* 1 names ‘Epstein, Brancusi, Archipenko, Dunikowski, Modigliani, and myself’ as the final point in a history of the vortex that begins with ‘the mountain’ and ranges across the ancient civilisations of Europe, China, Africa and Oceania. He was an early exponent of ‘direct carving’ – the practice of working out a sculptural design directly in stone, rather than copying from a maquette. Carvings such as *Seated Woman* (1914) demonstrate the expressive qualities of the technique, as it responds to the weight, shape and texture of the material in hand. He could be uncompromising in his commitment to abstracted form. As he announced in *Blast* (1915): ‘I SHALL DERIVE MY EMOTIONS SOLELY FROM THE ARRANGEMENT OF SURFACES.’ Yet his work also responded to the many drawings that he made, rapidly and with great skill, of scenes glimpsed on the move. He could be witty – note the phallic metaphor in his *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (1914); and tender, particularly in animal sculptures such as *Sleeping Fawn* (1913).

He was not widely known during his lifetime. After his death, friends such as Ezra Pound and later the curator Jim Ede, worked to build his reputation. He has since become central to the story of modern sculpture and the subject of numerous exhibitions and publications.

References and further reading

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Pound, E. (1916) *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*. London & New York: John Lane.

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IMAGE: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913

name of entry: ,Henri (1891–1915)’

Material: sculpture entitled *Red Stone Dancer*, 1913

Purpose of inclusion: example of artist’s work

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